

NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOFT | PC | PORTABLE | COIN-OP | SET-TOP | ONLINE

THE RISE AND RISE OF NINTENDO

And how the new DS Lite will help to drive the revolution...

XBOX 360 IN JAPAN

Final Fantasy's Sakaguchi leads the new game wave on Microsoft's console

LONG LIVE LIVE ARCADE

How Xbox 360 is safeguarding game history – and bringing indie development to the world

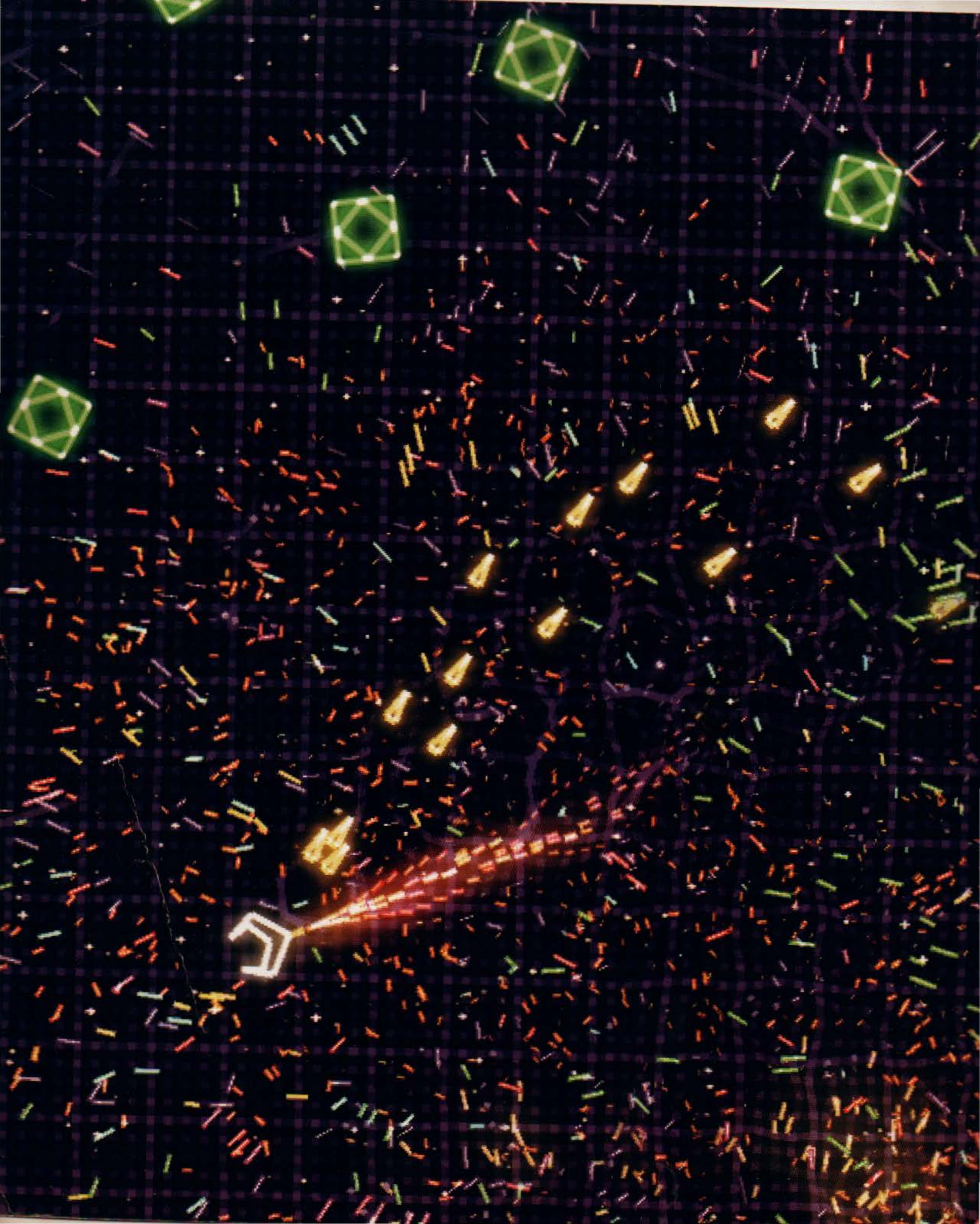
QUAKE WARS

The UK team leading id's FPS into Battlefield territory

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Eidos: from Tomb Raider to the brink of collapse and back again – so where now?

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Not so long ago, you were considered a groundbreaking videogame company if you got people who don't usually play videogames to play your videogames. Everyone proudly told anyone who'd listen about how they'd spread the good word of gaming, others wrote about it in newspapers and magazines, and the world became a better, happier place. But, underneath it all, nothing really changed. Having thrown himself so enthusiastically into that *Singstar* session after a few stiff snifters on Christmas day, uncle Ken didn't immediately go out and buy a PlayStation 2 and his own copy of a brilliantly executed karaoke party game. This doesn't demean the value of Sony's efforts, but it does show that they have only limited real value for an industry in need of new audiences who're not only willing to buy into the appeal of videogames but actually *buy* them.

Enter Nintendo. The company has always played up its 'fun for all the family' values, but in reality that has rarely amounted to more than parents' perceptions of 'the console brand that's appropriate for the kids'. With its DS, that has changed. Here is a gaming device that has actually succeeded in making the crossover from something with innate, undeniable novelty value to something that's as much a part of its users' everyday lives as their mobile phones or personal organisers. Finally, videogames have actually done it, and become as compelling to businesswomen on their lunch breaks as they are to kids playing linked-up *Mario Kart DS* in the playground.

One small point: this is all happening in Japan. But the catalyst for the phenomenon, Nintendo's DS *Brain Training* series, is on its way to the west (see p8), where it has every chance of gripping so many idle minds. And its arrival just happens to be lined up to coincide with the launch of something whose clean, refined lines and subtle colour scheme may be attractive to even those who've never previously touched a game console. Perhaps, then, uncle Ken will become a true convert yet.



EDGE

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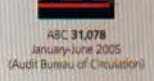
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"With half a face and half a chest, and all the guts in the world, he's back!"







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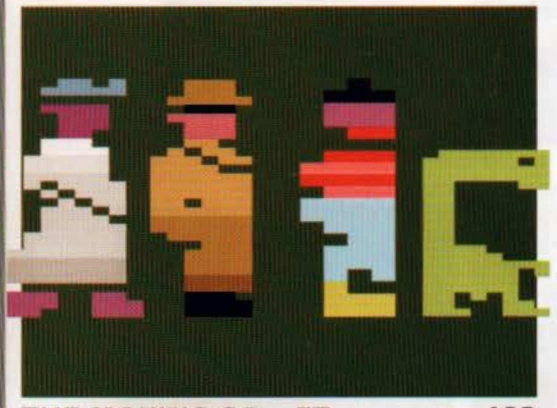
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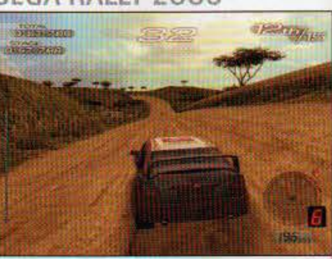
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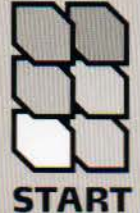
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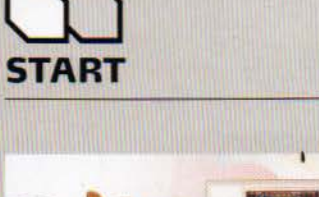








START




















START

HARDWARE

Nintendo sees the Lite

As its DS sows success in Japan, can a sleek new model help Nintendo reap a revolution in the west?



It's been just two years since Nintendo first announced the DS, and made those first, defensive claims that this new machine was not intended as a successor to the GBA. At the time, that seemed self-evident: surely this odd-looking concept console couldn't be meant as anything other than a side project? A little more than a year after launch, and the reality makes a mockery of Nintendo's initial protestations. With 13 million units shipped worldwide, the Japanese top ten consistently dominated by DS titles and the mainstream press taking note of handheld gaming in a way that hasn't happened since *Tetris*, the DS's heritage could hardly be more plain.

In Japan, it's numbers that tell the story of the machine's phenomenal year. Thanks to the eight places in the top ten that now seem permanently reserved for DS titles (a dominance which used to be enjoyed only by Sony's PS2), the handheld accounted for nearly 45 per cent of all software sold in Japan last year (according to Media Create data). This shift allowed Nintendo to leapfrog Sony in terms of overall control of the software market: whereas in 2004 53 per cent of Japanese game software sold was for Sony machines, and 43 per cent for Nintendo machines, in 2005 Sony's share had dropped to 41 per cent, eclipsed by Nintendo's 54 per cent. This demand for games is quite straightforwardly linked to strong hardware sales, which saw the DS comfortably outselling the PSP three or four fold over the Christmas period, peaking at nearly 600,000 units a week. Overall,



Although there's a perception that Europe is lagging behind in the software stakes, most major titles, such as *Nintendogs*, *Mario Kart DS*, *Animal Crossing*, *Electroplankton* and *Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time*, are either already out or due in the coming weeks





Nintendo is claiming sales of around five million units in Japan alone by January 2006 – with Sony confirming just double that number of PSPs shipped worldwide by November 2005.

These phenomenal sales figures were partially responsible for a hardware shortage that hit early in January – customer demand had simply bled DS stocks dry. Although this gave the PSP a chance to sneak ahead in the hardware sales charts for the first time since soon after the machine launched, it didn't defeat those still eager to get their hands on a DS. Consumer demand remained so strong that Tokyo stores were importing US units to sell on at an inflated ¥20,000 (£96), rather than the usual ¥12,800 (£61). These soon sold out, leading stores to bump prices for second-hand units to ¥18,000 (£86). Keen-eyed speculators were quick to take advantage of market conditions, selling on their own DSes to make a quick profit before replacing the machine once stock levels – and prices – returned to normal.

In 2004 53 per cent of Japanese games sold were for Sony machines, and 43 per cent for Nintendo's, but in 2005 Sony dropped to 41 per cent, eclipsed by Nintendo's 54 per cent

It's in the face of this enthusiasm that Nintendo has announced the remodelled DS Lite. Perhaps partly to blame for stock shortages of the old model, as production is switched to the new-look machine, it has already redeemed itself in many gamers' eyes by tackling what is often considered the DS's biggest failing: its aesthetics. Scrupulously clean, its neat lines and high-gloss finish clearly owe a debt of inspiration to Apple's iBook and, in a clear nod to how successfully the DS has been established as a brand, the Nintendo lozenge is dropped from the case, replaced with the subtle embossing of the twin screen logo. Although smaller, the size reduction isn't especially dramatic, bringing the dimensions down from 148.7x84.7x28.9mm to 133.0x73.9x21.5mm.

The basic format of the machine is obviously unchanged, but there are significant improvements inside. The screens are sharper and brighter, offering an improvement which may be as substantial as the shift in quality seen when US GBA SP stocks were replaced with fully backlit displays. Full brightness is promised to be a marked step up from current performance, but should still allow the machine to run for a full eight hours from a single charge (the Lite will use the same mini-charger as the GBA Micro). A new brightness control allows three lower brightness settings to be used, which should also enable players to eke out battery life. The power switch has been redesigned (it's now more like a PSP's) and moved from the front of the machine to the side, and both the D-pad and face buttons have been moved further to the top of the machine, which should considerably improve playing comfort – something that's long been an issue with DS fans who play with their consoles for hours, not minutes, at a time.

That leaves a lot of questions for the Lite to answer, however. So far, only images of a white version have been released, but it seems likely that the machine will be available in a few variant colours. Another concern is the stylus – with the new console a centimetre shorter than the original there is less space than ever for storage, and the original model's stylus was already as diminutive as was practical. A horizontal storage slot may well be the solution. Another issue is build quality: the original DS was admirably robust, but it's hard to imagine being as cavalier with a gleaming Lite as you were with your original silver brick. Nintendo maintains that the new model hits its usual benchmark for solidity (indeed, the GBA's makeover to the sleeker SP version was if anything tougher than the original), but may privately be expecting to sell a lot more slipcases this time round. More intriguing is the possibility of new, internal

Newswire



Gizmondo goes for broke

The documented financial freefall of Gizmondo reached an inevitable conclusion on January 20 as the company filed for administration in the UK via the US Securities and Exchange Commission. As stated in the report, the filing provides Gizmondo Europe 'with a moratorium in order to affect a financial restructuring of the business'. The Tiger Telematics subsidiary had a court hearing on January 31 to grant the administration order, which closely follows announcements of a $5m bridge loan and monthly staff cost cut of 50 per cent. Operations will continue as normal as the company considers its future, while its Game Studios and Sweden AB divisions await similar events. Its divisions in the US are unaffected.



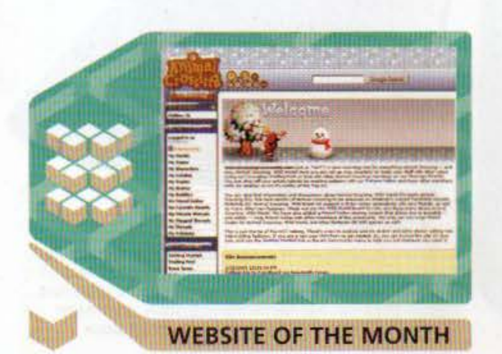
Both models are shown here actual size, and this demonstrates that the size reduction couldn't, and was never intended to be, the main purpose of the redesign. Instead, this is a refinement, switching to a new look that is more attractive to a broader audience, while also addressing some specific DS issues

capabilities. Rumours have long circlulated that Nintendo would update the DS firmware once the WFC online service launched, and some are predicting that the Lite will be able to download game demos over wifi and, crucially, store them in internal memory. Other upgrades might include an improved version of Pictochat or new organiser functions, but Nintendo won't confirm anything at this stage, other than to say that further announcements may be made before the Lite's Japanese launch, which will be on March 2 at ¥16,800 (£82). No release date or price has yet been confirmed for the west, but Nintendo says that the timing will reflect the company's current commitment to speeding the arrival of new products in Europe, which sounds hopeful for a pre-summer slot.

And that arrival in the west is key, because in the wider world the DS is yet to perform as convincingly as it has in Japan. Hardware sales have been solid, and the reception warm, but the machine isn't managing to hold its own against the PSP as convincingly, and software sales don't come anywhere close to matching their dominance of the domestic market. In the UK in particular, while the DS has notched up sales of a million units in less than a year (when the SP took closer to 18 months to top that number), it doesn't even match GBA software sales, let alone trouble the home-console market share. And for Nintendo, which has pinned its future on the idea that new ways to play are the key to cracking valuable new gaming markets, making a global success of the DS is a crucial stepping stone in proving – and preparing – the market for the upcoming Revolution.

So will the Lite be the machine to help the DS make the breakthrough? There's no question that its looks are likely to appeal to a wider range of consumers than before – it's clear the design intention was to produce something that was both gender-neutral and age-neutral to capitalise on the DS's ability to attract consumers from beyond the usual gaming audience. But, as ever, the price that's paid for wooing new buyers is alienating those who are left stuck with the old machine – particularly so soon after Christmas when many may have only just acquired one. Although gamers are becoming more accustomed to the idea of incrementally improved hardware, which is already standard in the mobile phone and music player market, it's a little harder to stomach if the mooted firmware upgrades offer new functionality rather than simple refinements of the machine's basic performance. Nonetheless, Nintendo has proved time and again that being ruthless with your core audience isn't as much of a risk as it may sound,





WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Just like never forgetting how to ride a bike, no matter how much time has passed since last feeling that icy 'forgot to check how much turnips are today' bedtime panic, it all comes flooding back with *Animal Crossing*'s initial three-syllable boot-up refrain.

For as much as the daily village activities are inspired by the Slow Life, there's an ever-present nagging tension in keeping track of letters, patterns, visits, buying things, selling things and where to put all those gyroids.

That's where Animal Crossing Community, one of the game's oldest and most feature-rich sites, comes in handy. From automatic Anicro Desapro pattern uploads and item checklists to overall town planning, it's still proving useful years later to keep the *Wild World* in order.

Site:
Animal Crossing Community
URL:
www.animalcrossingcommunity.com



so long as what you have to offer is appealing enough – as the SP and the Micro have proved. Indeed, the new model may well be the most effective way yet to spread the DS to the new markets that Nintendo is so desperate to reach: the most common response to the Lite so far is from keen gamers who are happy to contemplate passing on their old DS to a girlfriend or sibling in order to make the switch to the new machine. The machine's well-implemented game-sharing abilities also make a multi-DS household a uniquely appealing (and easily argued-for) prospect.

But if hardware and software have already proven themselves over the course of 2005, and if the robustness of the original model and the excellence of titles like *Wario Ware Touched!*, *Mario Kart DS* and *Nintendogs* haven't already convinced the majority of western gamers, then there's no reason to suppose that the Lite and the likes of *Metroid Prime Hunters* will. Instead, that task will fall to marketing, and it's clear that, in the UK at least, Nintendo's policy is as much about new ways to advertise as new ways to play. Its blanket sponsorship of Channel 4 comedy shows didn't do a particularly good job of communicating the advantages of the DS, but more focused efforts, such as the *Nintendogs* advertising which accompanies the canine reality show It's Me Or The Dog, have worked well. A similar model is to be followed with the arrival of *Brain Training*, still the biggest-selling DS game in Japan and a title that Nintendo sees as crucial for cracking the west. Advertising spots during Countdown, coverage on This Morning, endorsements from Wogan and a cover flash on the Express are all strong indications that the company is going to be successful by moving its marketing sights on from the dark days of 'Willst thou get the girl, or play like one?' Its ambitions in that regard will also be well served by



The 10-minute mind workout

CALCULATIONS

SYLLABLE COUNT

Japan's new brain game heads to UK

DAILY EXPRESS

AND PROUD OF IT

The 10-minute workout that can improve your brain

ONLY 30p TODAY

Mainstream press interest, such as this front-page flash and large feature on *Brain Training* in the Daily Express, is exactly the kind of coverage that Nintendo needs to produce if it's to hit its goal of selling another 250,000 DSes in the UK this spring

the recent announcement that Nintendo will be the main sponsor of the Game On exhibition when it returns to London to take up residence at the Science Museum. Accompanied by a presence in the kid-friendly, hands-on Launch Pad area, it's a smart move which simultaneously emphasises the interactivity of its products, its parent-friendly attitudes, its illustrious gaming heritage and its intention to push at the boundaries of gaming technology.

Astute, targeted marketing decisions like these will no doubt help Nintendo reach the wider market it's convinced exists worldwide, even if it has so far only found it on home soil. Nonetheless, it's crucial to remember that the company's current rude health only appears that way in contrast to the doldrums of the GameCube. The overall brand is still extremely marginalised worldwide, and – despite the success of the DS – it now shares the high-end handheld market, which it previously monopolised, down the middle with Sony (although both DS and PSP are still dwarfed by the 70 million GBA userbase). The question now is if the DS can produce a revolution in western gaming tastes in time for the arrival of its home console offering. If it can't, then Nintendo will move into the next generation as king of a lucrative, limited niche, financially secure once again as Japan's gaming royalty. If it can, then the rest of the industry may find itself urgently in need of some brain training of its own





In an unusual move, Nintendo launched its huge UK marketing push for *Brain Training* (above) at the Science Museum, which also served to highlight its £1m investment in the institution and attacted the interest of the mainstream press, such as Radio One (left)





Lite pickings

The first batch of games that will look good next to your new DS

Age Of Empires

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: BACKBONE



It's hardly a 'new way to play', but this classic conversion brings a style of gameplay to the DS which still feels fresh on a handheld and provides a good counterbalance to the likes of *Electoplankton*

Contact

PUBLISHER: MARVELOUS DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER



An unlikely collaboration between the makers of *Harvest Moon* and the creators of *Killer 7*, *Contact* promises to be an intruiging online RPG with a double-screened take on its world. One of the DS's most ambitious new projects

New Super Mario Bros

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Little concrete information – nor a revised title – has emerged since last E3, but this most eagerly anticpated of DS titles should be competed this year. 'The best *Mario Bros* ever' promises a rather rash Nintendo

Children Of Mana

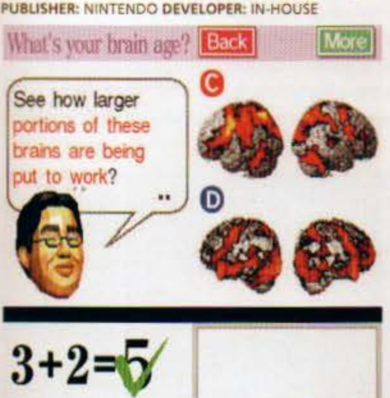
PUBLISHER: SQUARE-ENIX DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Looking stronger with each new screenshot released, it's hard not to feel confident that *Children Of Mana* will capture the charm, challenge and cameraderie of the SNES classic when it is released next month in Japan

Prof Kawashima's Brain Training

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Strictly limited by the internal clock to ten minutes' play per day, and certifiably good for you, *Brain Training* has been the DS's killer app in Japan. Nintendo is hoping the inclusion of sudoku will fuel a similar response in the UK

Metroid Prime: Hunters

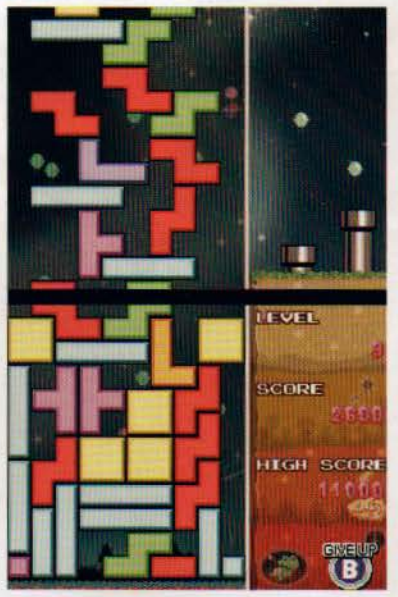
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



It's been a long wait for the DS's flagship title, but come May you'll be able to test for yourself if consistently encouraging feedback about the robustness of the control system is representative of the finished game

Tetris DS

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



There are new lures – tenplayer download play, fourplayer wifi matches, a more considered tap-and-drag touchscreen mode – but for many the simple delight of the endless stacking and clearing is all this classic needs

Tingle RPG (working title)

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Confirmed by Iwata last year, next to nothing is known about this adventure starring Link's least charismatic and most loathed sidekick. Perhaps this can do for Tingle what *Wario Ware* did for another badly dressed B-lister?

EVENT

Arcade gaming plays safe at ATEI

The coin-op industry's annual show offers little in the way of experimentation, but plenty for console owners to ponder

There's something in the air at videogame trade shows that's easy to overlook. Despite the lowest common marketing denominators of booth babe silicone and goodie-bag synthetics, their atmosphere is in part fuelled by wide-eyed excitement born from attendees' communal enthusiasm and love for the videogame form. ATEI, the UK's yearly gathering for the arcade entertainment and coin-op gambling industry, however, is not a videogame show. Here, gaming is playing to an away crowd, preaching to the decidedly unconverted arcade and amusement owners – those who have watched their videogame-related profit margins dwindle as hardware prices have risen in elegant inverse proportion to the number of punters that visit their pier and bowling-alley sideshows.

Here, the air is filled with cynicism. Videogames have the unenviable task of convincing sceptical buyers and suspicious gambling execs that they can earn a comparable income to the furiously flashing slot machines with which they share the show floor. They are not here to convince of their inherent merits; merely of their cold, hard, earning potential. Of particular interest to the average suited attendee is whether ATEI's newest arcade games can hold the attention of those few scruffy actual arcade players that somehow manage to gain entry to this supposedly industry-only event. And it's in this respect, perhaps more than any recent year that ATEI '06 delivered. For the first time in what seems like Ages, Sega really was *this good.* Alongside Konami, Namco and Taito, the four ATEI stalwart Japanese developers unveiled new games that looked better than anything running outside of a 360 can offer console owners right now. In a few cases, they even managed to shift the atmosphere of the show closer to a home gaming crowd's cheering enthusiasm.

Sega's stand, as always, was the centrepiece of the exhibition and this year it sat beneath an enormous video screen visible from all of Earl's Court. Playing footage from *Virtua Tennis 3*, *Virtua Striker 4 Ver 2006*, *Ford Racing: Full Blown*, *House Of The Dead 4* and *Afterburner 3*, all bar the latter were playable beneath. Of prime prominence was *House Of The Dead 4*, which sees the return of James Taylor, protagonist of *House Of The Dead 2*, and echoes the styling and feel of that game with tribute-style boss battles and consistent level-design homage. Gone are the previous game's shotguns, replaced now with lightweight submachine guns that, rather than requiring the genre staple of shooting off screen to reload, need only a sharp shake to refresh a clip.

Similarly, when zombies grab your character you're required to violently shake the gun to fill a gauge before you can break free and resume your bullet-spraying. The game, running as it does on Sega's new Lindbergh board, looks magnificent; electric blues and fizzing pinks dance and trail across the cabinet's enormous 62" DLP widescreen. However, despite its futuristic assurance, much of





Fully blown

It'll all be different this time next year

Of particular surprise was Sega's *Ford Racing: Full Blown*, a prototype build of which was playable at the show. Boasting 25 Ford-branded vehicles from GTs through to Mustangs and into the trucking horizon, the game is a fairly generic and straightforward link-up racer. The USP: an internal clock that will automatically and simultaneously update all cabinets in Europe later on in the year, providing eight new cars and 12 'replacement' tracks. "This feature will reinvigorate the game," remarked Sega in its press release, with telling foresight.









SNK Playmore's *Metal Slug 6* messes with the tried-and-tested formula of the previous six titles by including a zooming camera, two new buttons (one for a close-up attack and one for new weapon-switching capability), and a broader sheet of characters including Ralf Jones and Clark Steel from *King Of Fighters* and *Ikari Warriors* respectively

the actual skill of lightgun technique has seemingly regressed courtesy of the developer's choice of weapon. Often the gameplay is closer to a *Burning Ranger*-style fire-hose approach than anything requiring precise aiming or timing.

Virtua Tennis 3, conversely, remains extremely close to the formula set out in the two Naomi originals. Also running on Lindbergh, the (all male) characters and, for a novelty, the crowd, are stunningly recreated. The gameplay is as eloquently balanced as it ever was and sticks to the two-button control scheme (one for topspin, another for backspin and both for lobbing) that has proved so successful. In a move mirrored by many Japanese developers this year, the game also provides an *Initial D*-style IC smart card on which to store your personal data, game records and world ranking data.

Virtua Striker 4 Ver 2006, on the other hand, despite sharing the same card-based technology, was a disaster. Despite ostensibly aiming for *Pro Evolution Soccer's* looks, perspective and feel, there is none of that game's refined brilliance. The 12 new countries, 13 stadiums and latest player data additions do nothing to solve the game's underlying problem: it's just not much fun. Konami's actual arcade version of *Pro Evolution Soccer 2006* was predictably more successful in that respect.

Its principal lure for players is the online aspect of the game (your online opponent is visible via a souped-up webcam) and the cabinet even allows players to plug in their PS2's DualShocks, should they wish. The concept presumably felt a lot more solid in Japan where the take-up rate for Xbox Live has been slow, but in the west it's hard to see the machine really making a mark.

Of particular note, through its notable absence after the last two years of extravagant booths, was Sammy, the company that merged with Sega bringing with it its cheap and cheerful Atomiswave board. Just two new games were on show running on Atomiswave hardware: 2D fighter *Fist Of The North Star* and the latest SNK action hero, *Metal Slug 6*. The former looked solid but failed to satisfy the appetites of eager gamers who turned up in the vain hope of playing *Virtua Fighter 5*. Mercifully, neither game was demonstrated via

Two new games were on show running on Atomiswave hardware: 2D fighter Fist Of The North Star and the latest SNK action hero, Metal Slug 6

Sammy's appalling black European Atomiswave cabinets but rather were housed in Sega's own excellent Naomi Universal cabs whose Seimitsu sticks and buttons allowed for the precision input both games encouraged.

Precision input was on usual showboating display at Konami's booth, with *Dancing Stage Supernova* greeting arriving attendees. This looks to be the definitive European *DDR* iteration with over 250 songs, new battle modes and a global tournament system, and seems to cater more to the expert player than last year's more middle-of-the-road *Dancing Stage Fusion*. Konami also had two new lightgun games on show: the decidedly





In addition to *Virtua Tennis 3* and *House Of The Dead 4*, Sega's new Lindbergh hardware, inside which beats a weighty Intel Pentium 4 3.0Ghz HT CPU heart, promises *Afterburner 3* and *Virtua Fighter 5*. It's a line-up of forthcoming games that far outshines the dearth of titles available on the previous Naomi 2

Gotta catch 'em all

Sega moves from wrangling to footballer collecting

***Derby Owners Club*, Sega's gigantic horse racing, breeding and betting simulator, has been a relatively big success in UK arcades, bringing significant additional earning to many an amusement centre across the country. As a result, the company is introducing a new title in a similarly sprawling multiplayer shape: *World Club Champion Football*. It's a move that could just be a stroke of cross-marketing genius, working as it does in conjunction with collectable football card maker Panini. Players buy an initial starter pack of 11 player cards, which are then scanned into your booth. You then play team manager, improving your players through training and one-to-one motivation speeches. During matches you pick strategy and formation, and it's possible to move each player's card on a specially designed miniature pitch, which then affects the action on the main screen. After each match you receive a new random foil-wrapped card, which can be substituted into your team should you wish. It's incredibly convoluted, complicated and initially inaccessible but, as *Derby Owners Club* has demonstrated, could become an underground amusement phenomenon thanks to the subject matter and Sega's faultless execution.**



Positive gaming?

Health clubs and schools are in Scandinavians' sights

It was Scandinavian company Positive Gaming that showed perhaps the most initiative in taking arcade gaming through new frontiers at ATEI. Specialising in 'providing the best machine dance solutions', the company is aiming to take a piece of potential Konami litigation fodder, *DDR* clone *In The Groove*, into fitness clubs, dance studios and even schools. Interestingly, it provided a sixplayer simultaneous game of *In The Groove* using the excellent Cobalt Flux wireless dance mats, a perfect setup as a health club alternative to step aerobics. However, with a mission statement to 'provide healthy gaming alternatives with no elements of gambling, violence or pornography', it wasn't entirely clear which attendees the company had come to impress.

mainstream lightweight *Cooper's 9* and the particularly clunky Japanese police simulator, *Lethal Enforcers 3*. Neither dazzled, especially not in the sights of newly merged Namco Bandai's eagerly awaited *Time Crisis 4*. This title ran on System Super 256, another of the next-generation arcade boards that have leapfrogged last-generation console systems. Here, pointing the gun outside of the screen to the left or right changes your view on the action allowing you to approach each scene via a 180-degree arc. It's a move that affords surprising freedom in a genre that offers only occasional innovation.

Taito had the poorest show of the four heavyweights with just two games on show: *King Of Jurassic*, a rival to Sega's popular kids' beetle-themed card battle game *Mushiking*, and drift-racing contender *Battle Gear 4*. As with the previous *Battle Gear* title, car stats and data are saved on a collectable ignition key. Visually, the game is ropey but the greater realism of the car handling will ensure its niche following will continue to be distinct from *Initial D*'s equally vociferous crowd.

ATEI 2006 continued to demonstrate how arcade developers, now at the mercy of the console scene, are no longer afforded much room for invention or novelty. Outside of Konami's lurking *Gashaaaan!* (see 'Making quiet history'), there were no outlandish peripherals, no delightfully physical experiences that only a six-foot-tall machine could provide a player; nothing spilled from an R&D department drunk on wild-eyed invention. Instead, the sea of sequels lined up like soldiers in training for the real war in six months when they'll be shipped mechanically on to the next generation of home console hardware. Without exclusive experiences to be found in the arcade, three-minute bursts of titles like *Virtua*

There were no outlandish peripherals, nothing spilled from an R&D department drunk on wild-eyed invention



Dancing Stage Supernova, a 75-per-cent-complete version of which was on show at ATEI, will rather unusually be released worldwide with a springtime US launch followed by a European debut and finally an appearance in Japan. It also marks the return of the much-missed arcade version's animated dancers



BETTER THAN LIVE

It was hoped that Microsoft's first 360 dashboard update would resolve some of the glitches that made gamerpoints impossible to obtain. But shortly after the January 30 patch was enforced it seemed the opposite had been achieved, a Live account with the alias Dondums suddenly topping its global leaderboard with an impossible score of 4,916,919, achieved in Sega's *Condemned*, a game previously known for its 'Golden Bird' glitch that deprived players of final unlockables. Had it actually given them all to Dondums instead, it may have explained his attainment of 2,550 out of 50 achievements – a feat that earned him immediate, though almost certainly mistaken, recognition as a hacker. When we last checked, the offending score was being reset to a more believable 2,220.



Lethal Enforcers 3 includes a compromise to the *Police 911* cabinet's motion sensors. Now your view is automatically set to hide behind an onscreen riot shield until you lift your gun, whereupon it's lowered and you're free to aim. *Time Crisis*' duck pedal works far more effectively







Tennis 3 and *House Of The Dead 4* serve as little more than three-minute public demos of near-future home gaming at £1 a shot. With the introduction of downloadable tasters on 360 Live, this removes yet another justification for the presence of videogames in the coin-op industry.

Ostensibly, ATEI '06 was healthy, the slew of new titles all bigger, bolder and better-looking than anything to be found in the living room, something it hasn't been possible to say for some time. However, Sega et al are clearly using platforms such as Lindbergh to develop a solid catalogue of games ready to port to the richer next-gen home market – something that makes good business sense but doesn't provide any of the distinctive encounters that would mark the scene on gamers' maps. In a perfect world there would be companies existing solely to make arcade videogaming a truly unique experience: providing something impossible to replicate in the living room; a reason for players to play away from home again. The arcade scene is theoretically crucial to the videogames industry providing, as it does, gameplay's three-minute singles in a virtual world increasingly obsessed with unrestrained prog epics. But until, through innovation, intelligence and inventiveness, arcade games can once again fill gamers with an air of wonder and amazement, the atmosphere of Britain's coin-operated game show will remain strained.



Hitting Japan in the summer, *Time Crisis 4* boasts cleaner graphics than its previous incarnation. Despite the jaggies clean-up, System 256 is close to Sony's PS2 architecture



Making quiet history

Konami's bouncing balls lift ATEI's visitors

Tucked around the back of Konami's main stand was the unassuming star of the show, recent Japanese-only curio *To Kyu Okoku Gashaaaan! (Shoot Ball Kingdom Craaaash!)*. A cross between Sony's coloured bouncing ball Bravia advert, *Bishi Bashi Special* and a giant fourplayer DS, this was easily the most interesting concept on offer. Four players simultaneously throw coloured balls at two enormous DLP touchscreens in a series of quirky minigames ranging from seeing how many bottles you can smash to batting away a hungry crocodile intent on snapping at your avatar. You either compete against one another to earn coins or cooperatively for points. Despite its heavy Japanese styling, text and screaming announcer, so wonderfully obvious is the concept that everyone who dared step up to the machine was quickly squealing with delight and didn't leave until the credits rolled. Like the *Dancing Stage* games, Gashaaaan! removes the physical barrier of the stick and button setup: you just have to be able to throw a ball (preferably with accuracy) to play all the way from start to finish. Sadly, it's unlikely we'll get to see *Gashaaaan!* in Europe; there were no press releases to accompany its newest Japanese machine, and our questions were met with little more than resigned shrugs from Konami's staff.

Newswire



StarForce defends itself

At the end of January, Russian software security firm StarForce issued a second challenge to critics by threatening weblog BoingBoing with legal action. The offending article described online attempts to boycott the company's StarForce security software – a compulsory install for owners of *TrackMania* among others. Many have suggested, via message boards and blogs, that the technology's optical device drivers are potentially hazardous to hardware – a claim that both StarForce and clients such as Ubisoft strongly deny. It further appears that no one, despite the chance of an unforgettable Christmas, took the firm up on its December offer of $10,000 (raised from an initial $1,000) to anyone who could demonstrate, in its Moscow office, the software having a detrimental effect on their PC.



"It was there that he met some geeks with attitude, 'chip' musicians, making tunes from 8-bit computer games (most modern games are 90-bit)."
The Times Magazine invents its own console generation in a piece discussing Malcolm McLaren's Fashionbeast, a new, expensive, gaming-inspired clothing range for kids

"1. We make DRM illegal. It would be against the law to encumber any digital media with any device or software that makes it un-copyable or difficult to copy.
2. We make trading of IP with other people in a way that is against the IP owner's wishes punishable by death."
Ron Gilbert outlines his 'everyone wins' proposal for software security, which we fully expect to take off

"dont lost time with 'you are the god' you need create a new title, and new! fantasy and sci-fi is great, much better than a stupid "real life" game."
A **poster to John Romero's blog** responds to the ex-id man's 'I'm doing an MMO' announcement

"Every division is going to look through and evaluate how to best realign their people, their investments and our technologies against a set of priorities that will take us through transition and allow us to capture the next wave of growth."
Electronic Arts' European communications director **Tiffany Steckler** effectively communicates the reasoning behind the company's mass January redundancies



Retro evolved

The maker of Darwinia lets off some steam on the trials of independent development

After being showered with critical acclaim for its visually gripping and viscerally unsettling *Darwina*, Introversion is returning to its geek-wish-fulfilment roots. This time, instead of the hacker chic of *Uplink*, it's taken its inspiration from WarGames. We caught up with creator **Chris Delay** (above) to find out how *Darwinia* fared, discuss its move on to Valve's Steam distribution service, and hear about the genesis of *Defcon*, which is previewed on p38.

How did the experience of launching *Darwinia* compare to launching *Uplink*, when you were still totally unknown?
It's been quite similar, to be honest – in that it was going downhill. *Darwinia* did very well in most of the reviews, but commercially it didn't really do very well at all – certainly no better than *Uplink*. We did the PR thing a lot better this time round – with *Uplink* there was no PR whatsoever, and with *Darwinia* we really got it right, but it didn't translate into the kind of sales we wanted. So we figured out that we'd basically ballsed up the launch totally – a series of compounded mistakes. The initial prince point was too high – it came out at £30 because we thought, well, we've spent three years on this, we've poured our hearts into it, we'll make it 30 quid, and that didn't work at all. And we had an initial demo version which didn't have a tutorial that just confused people – we had a massive wave of people downloading the demo and then just turning it off because they couldn't figure it out. So it was all sort of dying down, and we were looking ahead to the third game, and then Steam came along. And it's just completely changed everything. It's a different league of response from the public. Steam sold more in the first three weeks than we sold since the game launched, altogether, across shops, across the website. It's astonishing. It's a different world in terms of making money from games.

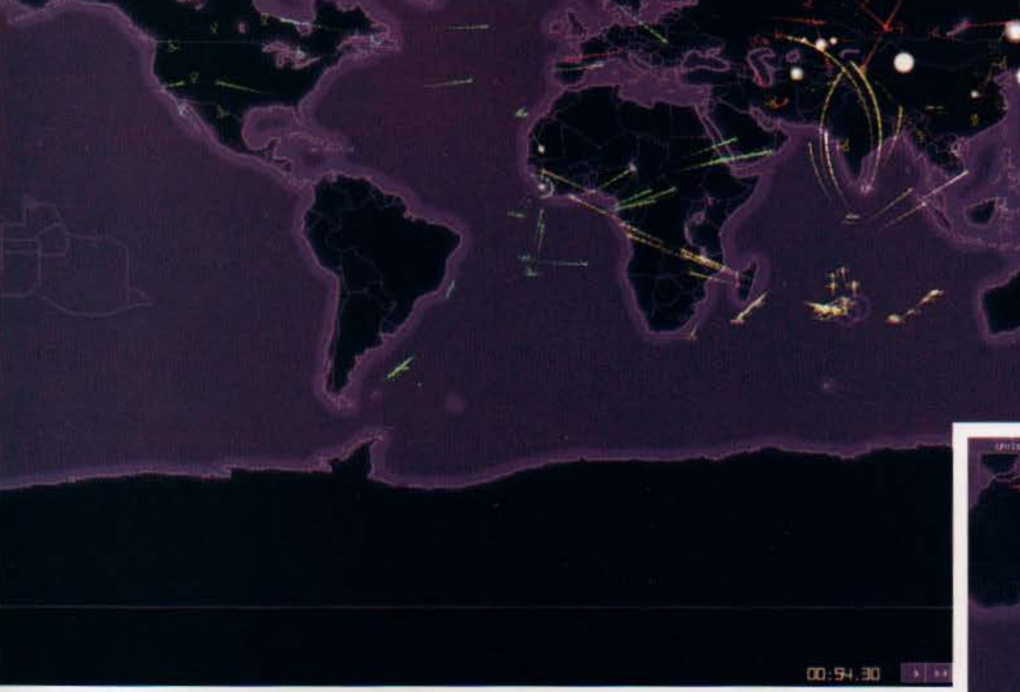
"Steam sold more copies of Darwinia in the first three weeks than we sold since the game launched, altogether, across shops, across the website. It's astonishing"

Do you get a good deal, financially, out of being on Steam?
It's brilliant. It's a different league from any publication deal we've ever seen. There's no retailer, for a start. If you have an ordinary game in the high street, it's incredible the mathematics behind who keeps the money. The retailers take half of it, straight away, the rest goes to the publisher, and there's a tiny little bit left over for the developers. So with Valve there's no retailer, and then their publication deal gives a much higher royalty than any other we've ever seen. We haven't made any decisions about *Defcon* yet, but there's not really much impetus within Introversion to put *Defcon* out on the high street. It's something we did with *Uplink*, and we did pretty well with that, but with *Darwinia* it was essentially a disaster. And we can see a difference in the stores themselves since *Uplink*, in the PC sections – I was in a games store recently and it just didn't have a PC section. They had space for DVD movies, but not for PC games, and I think that's the way it's going to go. In a few years time there'll be *The Sims* and nothing else. And when there are things like Steam, there's really no need for us to bother. With that and Xbox Live Arcade I don't think there's been a more positive time for independent developers.

How did *Defcon* come about?
It was during *Darwinia's* development, and I was crushingly, crushingly bored – *Darwinia* really wasn't working at that point. It was all over the place – it had a really bad development history, 18 months of experiments out the window. And I had



The beauty and invention of *Darwinia* produced almost univeral critical acclaim but didn't successfully translate that acclaim to commercial success. The deal with Steam delivered the demo direct to gamers' desktops, and resuscitated the game's sales overnight







As a high-concept, low-content game, *Defcon* plays to Introversion's strengths. Like its forebears, the result is instantly recognisable and will age better than many grander titles

this idea for a nuclear war game, and I thought I could probably knock it up in a day. What was happening was that it was exactly 24 hours before the final episode of 24, and I was all excited and I thought, right, Jack Bauer, he's been up for 24 hours and I decided I would do the same – that I'd spend the next 24 hours making this game. So I stayed up for 24 hours, worked like crazy, and at the end of it collapsed and watched the last 24. The game wasn't finished – by the end of the day I'd realised it was a stupid thing to aim for – and I knew it was going to need longer. So over the course of the next week I did more and more on it, 18-hour days, didn't see anyone, and at the end of seven days I had a fully working multiplayer prototype. And so then I showed it to [fellow Introversion founders] Mark and Tom in the next meeting, and [laughs], well, they weren't impressed at all that I'd wasted so much time on this game instead of working on *Darwinia*. So we shelved it.

Any qualms about releasing a videogame that's about killing civilians?

No [laughs]. We are aiming for a record, though, I have to say. I've often wondered about the number of people I've killed in games over the years, and we making that basically an irrelevant number once you've played *Defcon*. Your score, in a one-on-one game, is basically the number of people you kill. You get one point per civilian, and a winning score is usually around 80 million. We've played on that a bit – there's an element of Dr Strangelove madness in the games. The nuclear missiles fly quite slowly and gracefully, and they land on a city with a little rumble and a calm statement that there have been this many million casualties, and there's this element that you're some insane general in an underground bunker fighting an insane war that's just going to end up killing everybody.

How are you dealing with the opponent AI in the singleplayer game?

It's ongoing. It's turning out to be a challenge. The biggest problem is that we don't know how to win. Why would we? We've created this game with six basic unit types, and it's all very academically correct that each is vulnerable to one other unit, and attacks one other unit, and there's all the scissors-paper-stone stuff going on, but all that's actually bollocks. Actually putting together a winning strategy is extremely difficult, because when you launch an attack on an enemy, you give away the locations of all your ground silos and all your submarines, which is basically everything. And so, in an awful lot of the games we've played, nobody's won. It's just been a universal catastrophe – mutually assured destruction. The reality of it is when you've lost 90 per cent of your population, and your enemy's lost 95 per cent, it's difficult to say that you've won. You haven't in any real sense – you can't win a game of nuclear war. You just lose the least.

The development time on *Defcon* has been much shorter than *Darwinia*. Have you enjoyed it more?

It's been a lot less stressful. It's a romantic idea, experimenting for 18 months on an off-the-wall game idea, but the reality is that when your money's running out and you can't afford the rent, it's terrifying. And you're not at any point certain that you've got anything that's any good. Even when it's finished and wrapped and gold-mastered – before the first reviews come in, you're lacking any kind of distance from the project so you're thinking that it might be a complete pile of arse. So with *Defcon* it's been much easier to look at the game and know we've got something solid.



AUTUMNAL SHOWER PALACE

時雨殿

Visitors to Kyoto's newly opened Shigureden will find themselves playing a virtual version of the traditional Japanese Karuta card game via a 6.6x7.5-metre floor of LCD panels and a revamped, buttonless Nintendo DS.

The Nintendo connection is no coincidence: ex-company president Hiroshi Yamauchi sits on the board of the new cultural centre, and was instrumental in creating the interactive exhibit. The lit floor panels display illustrated versions of the Hyakunin Isshu, 100 ancient poems by 100 ancient poets, which together make a set of the Karuta cards that Nintendo itself has manufactured for a century in its playing-card division.

Yamauchi's attachment to the Hyakunin Isshu doesn't end there – upon announcing the 2004 foundation of an internal animation studio at Nintendo, he expressed his desire to create a film about them as its first project.

• www.shigureden.com

INTERVIEW

Brand new life

How an American retailer's quest is keeping the past alive, despite those that would leave it dead

EBay speculators have recently suffered a series of jolts. After reliably commanding prohibitively high prices for years, sudden influxes of 'brand new, factory sealed!' copies of *Rez*, *Gitaroo Man*, *Persona 2* and *Rhapsody* began pouring in from seemingly nowhere, and at near-retail costs that quickly drove down the collective value. We spoke with Game Quest's **Kevin Baker** to find out how a relatively unknown game retail chain made the switch to working with publishers to release fresh prints of long dead games.

"A lot of the publishers don't understand the collector or the eBay market. They're in the business of publishing, rather than marketing a product to a niche"

Did you meet any resistance when you first pitched the reprint idea?

Resistance is still in place. Keep in mind that a lot of the publishers don't understand the collector or the eBay market. They're in the business of publishing, rather than marketing a product to a niche, so that's where we're able to work with them to slowly establish a business model that they don't see as viable to do themselves.

If you look at their business model, they're historically focused on frontline goods, because that brings in the bulk of their profit margin. Once the item has become a catalogue good, there are some taxation reasons that they can't hold on to inventory, and they feel like it's one of those marketplaces where if a company like us wants to take on the financial burden, they're open to it.



One factor that convinced them was that when their game is being sold for $100-200 on eBay, they weren't getting any benefit out of it, and it actually was probably hurting their franchise rather than helping it.

How can you be sure that the market can sustain a reprint?

Let me give you an example with *Rez*. The last time we had stock of *Rez*, prior to the reprint, we secured maybe 50 or 80 pieces that Sega was left with prior to discontinuation. We were able to sell that title as high as $79 and had interest from a lot of museums – even the Smithsonian Museum in Washington was one of our buyers. It had an academic value to it beyond just the gamer's perspective. If a game is being recognised in a whole different marketplace, we feel that it's definitely one that we need to work on.

As you're surely aware, you've upset some collectors, who've seen their own collections' value fall. What's the rationale behind not adding a 'second print' tag to the reprints?

Any time you change the artwork on any product that needs to be reprinted, it has to be approved by the manufacturer. We would have to go through an extra process and pay extra money to get a product that otherwise would have the same content value.



Gitaroo Man **(above) has been one of the most successful reprints: few secondhand copies ever circulated, since those who bought it didn't want to part with it. Titles like *Panzer Dragoon Saga* (left) and *Valkyrie Profile* regularly top the request lists**

Anything in a collectors' market has a perceived value and an actual value. What we're doing is trying to bring the product back at a market value, so that gamers have an opportunity to buy the game, not just the collectors who're trying to either profit from it on eBay or want the benefit of saying: "I'm the only one who has this".

We're not intentionally trying to hurt the collectors' market, we're trying to serve a gamers' market. If in the process we're stepping on the toes of the collectors, I apologise, but then again if Game Quest isn't doing it, tomorrow another company could come in and do the same thing we've been successful at.

What kind of forthcoming titles are you working on?

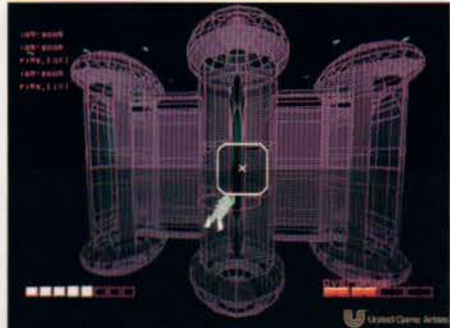
Konami and Square-Enix are at the top at the moment; both of the publishers have very good franchises. Right now *Valkyrie Profile* is definitely on the top of the request list. *Suikoden 2* is another one, but now seeing as how they're releasing a PSP version of *Suikoden 1* and *2*, we'd only consider it if there's sustained demand. Otherwise, we might have missed the opportunity on that one.

And what about expanding the operation to Europe?

Actually, on average we process about 50 orders a day outside the US, and have about 200 retailers that we service in Europe and Australia. The thing that we have to keep in mind with Europe is the PAL/NTSC factor. Most of the gamers can overcome it, but it's not as simple as that. We haven't ruled out anything yet, but we think there's plenty of opportunity for growth.



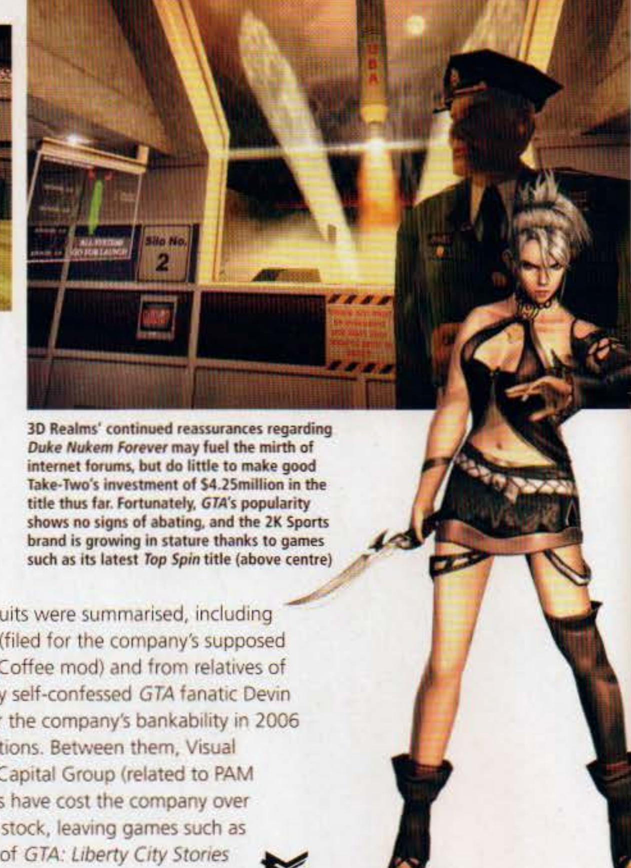




Baker is coy about total figures, but willing to confirm that an average print run can be comfortably in excess of 10,000 copies. Artistically interesting games like *Rez* (above) have helped extend the potential market beyond just hardcore collectors







3D Realms' continued reassurances regarding *Duke Nukem Forever* may fuel the mirth of internet forums, but do little to make good Take-Two's investment of $4.25million in the title thus far. Fortunately, *GTA*'s popularity shows no signs of abating, and the 2K Sports brand is growing in stature thanks to games such as its latest *Top Spin* title (above centre)

PUBLISHING

Take-Two feels the heat

The videogame industry's most ambitious publisher sees the year begin amid relocations, lawsuits and financial concerns

The common perception of Take-Two Interactive as an indomitable market force was shaken in January and early February by unforeseen events and financial revelations. On January 22, a large-scale fire swept through the New York offices of several company subsidiaries, and, though no employees were hurt, the extent of the damage to the affected businesses ensured that they had to be temporarily relocated. Elsewhere in the city, the company's headquarters and those of key subsidiary Rockstar Games were unaffected. The cause of the blaze is so far unknown.

The company then filed a delayed annual report to the SEC on January 31, detailing past, present and potentially upcoming concerns. Multiple pending *GTA*-related lawsuits were summarised, including those from the city of Los Angeles (filed for the company's supposed concealment of the notorious Hot Coffee mod) and from relatives of police officers shot dead in 2003 by self-confessed *GTA* fanatic Devin Moore. Finally, doubt was cast over the company's bankability in 2006 by details of its high-profile acquisitions. Between them, Visual Concepts, Firaxis, Indie Built, Gaia Capital Group (related to PAM Development) and Irrational Games have cost the company over $130 million in cash and restricted stock, leaving games such as *Prey*, *Bully* and the PS2 conversion of *GTA: Liberty City Stories* to help foot the bill in 2006.

Continue

A PAL Guitar Hero
For once the stars align and good sense prevails

Katamari T-shirts
We thank Takahashi for saying yes to merchandise

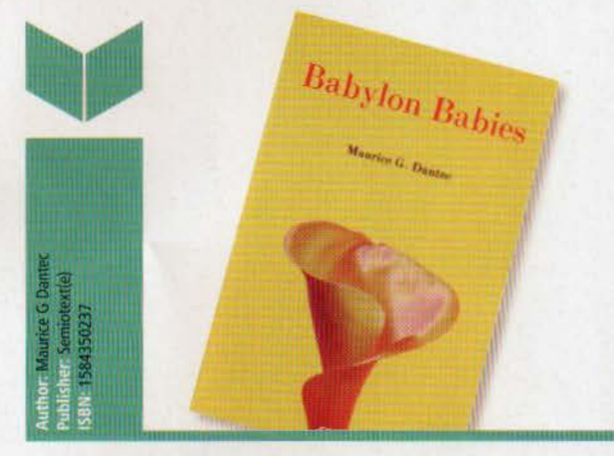
Duke Nukem Forever
Because continue seems the most appropriate word

Quit

GBA Micro fascias
Where are all the really interesting ones, hmmm?

Mobile phone games
Why – *still* – aren't there more good ones, hmmm?

Roman numerals
What's wrong with, well, normal ones, hmmm?



Author: Maurice G Dantec
Publisher: Semiotext(e)
ISBN: 1584350237

BABYLON BABIES

Eclectic French sci-fi-punk gets messy with the addition of an all-action anti-hero

Originally published in 1997, Babylon Babies marks the first English translation of self-styled enfant terrible Maurice G Dantec. According himself the status as one of the most loved and most hated of French authors, frankly it's hard to see what the fuss is about. In many ways this is traditional hardboiled cyberpunk, albeit within a contemporary setting.

Muslim warrior Toorop, having fought through Sarajevo and Grozny, finds himself astride the Kazakh/Russian/Chinese border picking on border guards, his life devoid of meaning. But thanks to the machinations of the local mafia, ambitious Soviet military officers and Canadian cultists, he's the perfect man for a job: take a confused, possibly deranged, girl to Montreal and wait for instructions. What could possible go wrong?

Considering Toorop's ordered a grenade launcher, assault rifle and pump-action shotgun, plenty. And it's in the Canadian version of New York that Dantec starts to get mega, as well as meta, physical. Throwing in the Hell's Angels and their rivals, Rock-Machines, the Russians are also on Toorop's trail. And that's before he begins to meet colleagues killed in wars years ago. The result becomes a confusing mix of French philosophical musings – Dantec's a big fan of Gilles Deleuze – and cod genetic ramblings. So while, at best, the action's comparable to Richard Morgan's Takeshi Kovacs books (and maybe it's no surprise a film is in the works), by the final page you know it was big, but not particularly clever.



Author: Jesper Juul
Publisher: MIT Press
ISBN: 0 262 10110 6

HALF-REAL

Ludologist and assistant professor Jesper Juul builds foundations of academic game studies

One of better known of the current crop of researchers into the nature of play, Jesper Juul's Half-Real (based on his PhD work and including companion website at www.half-real.com) is an attempt to construct a basic theory of videogames. Certainly, first impressions are promising. As he points out, the title itself encapsulates some of the slippery nature of the area. Games aren't real, hence the media's constant use of the label virtual, but games do create new situations and even behaviours for our real lives. And it's this juxtaposition of real rules within a fictional world that is the crux of Juul's exploration.

Things soon begin to get bogged down by definition. Old favourites like 'game', 'play' and 'gameplay' are laboured, while the seminal approaches of Huizinga, Caillois and Csikszentmihalyi are unpicked and critiqued. Of course, for academics this is the standard approach, and presumably the game students who find Half-Real on their recommended reading lists will gain plenty of food for thought. For the layman, or even the jobbing game developer, there are fewer nuggets.

Approaches such as Bernard Suits' efficiency could shake up EA's annual *FIFA* design meeting, and Juul does pick out some interesting points concerning the coherence of in-game time, but at heart this is descriptive book. Rather than find ways of improving the canon of games, it's happy to categorise what already exists.

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Medal Of Honor: Airborne

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** EA



A potentially misleading blend of realtime and target footage is all that's been seen of this apparent visual leap for the forlorn series. If anything can make it a new-gen reality, it's RenderWare

Star Trek: Legacy

FORMAT: 360, PC **PUBLISHER:** BETHESDA



Bethesda needs to eradicate a lot of bad memories (not least of the whole Activision-versus-Viacom debacle) with a 3D strategic space battler that encompasses all of the series' eras

Killzone: Liberation

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** SONY



Something much-needed on PSP from Guerilla: a tailor-made title rather than a clumsy port. Described as an 'intense portable experience', it offers a consistent story and thirdperson action

Street Fighter Alpha Anthology

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Scarcity of decent ports means that fans will be keenly testing this latest PS2 compilation for evidence of arcade perfection. The complete series will be joined by *Pocket Fighter*'s arcade original

The Silent Hill Experience

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI



Neither a potentially disturbing prog rock band nor a proper series instalment, this collection of interactive comics, music and interviews is more akin to the GBA's Silent Hill Play Novel

Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** SONY



Together with *Splinter Cell Essentials* and *Tomb Raider Legend*, SCEA's title is leading the charge in terms of second-wave PSP visuals. Let's hope it's a return to form rather than another flop

Devil Summoner: Kuzunoha Raidou

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** ATLUS



Any concerns raised by the delay in release (it's currently March) have been allayed by the latest media to arrive from Atlus. The battle system holds plenty of promise, and it's gorgeous to boot

Medieval 2: Total War

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Creative Assembly's track record would suggest that even shots like this understate the latest *Total War* title's potential. The suggestion of 10,000-strong battles should not be taken lightly

The Da Vinci Code

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** 2K GAMES



Quite what *Getting Up* developer The Collective plans to do with this prized licence remains hazy, but the assistance of Revolution founder Charles Cecil will hopefully steer it clear of disaster



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Narbacular Drop

www.nuclearmonkeysoftware.com/narbaculardrop.html

Somewhere in a distant parallel universe, Nuclear Monkey Software's *Narbacular Drop* has been licensed and exists as *Twin Peaks: The Game*. The first interactions with the game's dual-portal system is an entirely disorienting experiment in mirror-image rooms that fold back in on themselves, which you watch yourself depart at the same time as you re-enter.

But back in this universe, the game is a 3D throwback to classic puzzle-platforming, where a princess escapes the dungeon in which she's been imprisoned by triggering switches, escaping peril and reaching otherwise inaccessible exits utilising little more than the portals.

As with old puzzlers like Tecmo's *Solomon's Key*, *Narbacular Drop* homes in on a single interactive mechanic and designs the world around it, rather than diluting itself with competing ideas, giving it a sense of cohesion even at its most experimental. With a reported forthcoming rewrite in Source and eventual Steam release, the future looks bright for this student-created hit.

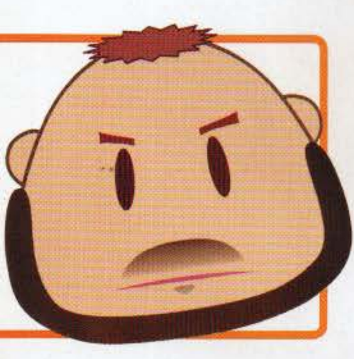
Brain Training, to be released as *Brain Age* in the US, has resonated especially well with Japan's ageing population. Can Nintendo really expect it to do so well in the west, or will the inclusion of sudoku be enough to make it a hit?

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Winter wonderland

Game producer Brick Bardo chills out



It's cold, so cold. This winter is really freezing Japan. Snow is falling at a volume we've never seen before and the temperatures are the lowest since we started to measure them. Please, can't someone stop this? I guess we are experiencing the changes involved with global warming, but why does it have to be this freezing?

In Japan, the end of the year is a very crucial moment. Parents get their bonuses at work, kids want their Christmas presents, and at the new year people receive their Otoshidama – a small envelope containing money – from their relatives. This makes the period very important for videogame sales. But the end of 2005 was anything but exciting. There were no big titles to excite the market like in previous years – few big and popular Square-Enix or SCE games, for example. Microsoft embarked on a big communication campaign, which included airing a lot of commercials on TV, but its Xbox 360 was a clear disappointment (no big surprise, really). The only thing that remains a talking point from the Xbox 360 launch in Japan is the size of the console's AC adaptor (huge) and the amount of heat it produces (lots). To tell the truth, this is very sad. The Xbox 360 should have brought some interest in the coming new generation of consoles, with the highly anticipated PS3 and the mysterious and innovative Revolution. Instead, the end of the year was very calm. The calm before the storm?

If you take Mario Kart DS out of the equation, you find games that can hardly be placed in a traditional category. They are all very close to genres that have not been very successful in the past in Japan: education and edutainment

But one thing has to be said: the DS performed superbly, a one-man show. Nintendo managed to come up with mega hits that have proved to be strong sellers: *Nintendogs, Otona No DS Training* and its sequel *Motte Otona No DS Training, Oideyo Dobustu No Mori* and *Mario Kart DS*. OK, these games are not very sexy, but they sell a lot, to a point that the DS is sold out. I thought this would end in January and that the DS would be easy to find again, but it is still sold out. It is almost impossible to find one.

If you take *Mario Kart DS* out of the equation, you find games that can hardly be placed in a traditional category. They are all very close to genres that have not been very successful in the past in Japan: education and edutainment. In addition, these games don't target kids, but adults. *Otona No DS Training* has been the biggest surprise of the last 12 months. I mean, look at it – it is monochrome, it has basic graphics, tons of text, and minimal sound. Importantly, though, it retails at ¥2,800 (£14).

It seems that Japanese society is ageing fast, and most people associate ageing with becoming more limited mentally. So there is common desire to combat this process as early as possible – and I think Nintendo has done well to identify this, although it is also true that *Otona No DS Training* is very well designed, featuring mathematics and



The games pile up for sale in Japanese stores (left), but actual DS units have been thin on the ground. When it launches, then, the new DS Lite is certain to be a massive success

memory tests – simple challenges you need to pass as fast as possible. Another reason for its success is certainly its unique interface, which incorporates using both the touchscreen and the microphone. Also, the game measures the supposed age of your brain. This is a sensitive aspect of your psychology: how happy would you be to see that you are getting old, that your mental faculty is getting rusty? So you feel the need to improve yourself. I have to admit, this game is very well designed.

Not so long ago, Japanese people would think that it is impossible to have fun while studying, that studying is something that must be taken seriously. But this is changing. When I take the subway, I often see salarymen with their DSes trying hard to challenge their brains. Yes, with this particular title Nintendo has delivered a kind of a blueprint which perfectly suits the changes that are happening in Japanese society.

OK, now it's cold and I'm going to test my own brain. I don't want my mind to age too fast, do I? Besides, perhaps the activity will help me to warm up a bit.

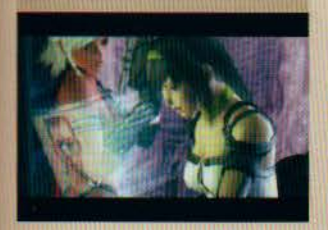
It's games that defy normal categorisation like *Nintendogs* and *Animal Crossing: Wild World* that have proved the biggest hits in both the east and the west. Can Nintendo keep the innovations coming or will these new genres inevitably become old hat as the DS succumbs to sequels and the focus shifts to pleasing existing users?

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Eyedentify



Looking set to wipe the sleep from Sony's EyeToy, the mysterious *Eyedentify* is the front runner to prove what PS3's Cell architecture can do with camera input.
PS3, SONY

Loco Roco



Despite the machine's power, it's becoming clear that what the PSP does best is display gleaming, crisp-cut slices of colour. Or slippy, squashy globules, in this case.
PSP, SCEI

Test Drive Unlimited



Atari has laudably given Eden time to apply those final licks of paint, lending 360's online owners' club a shimmering beauty that we hope is borne out beneath the hood.
360, ATARI

The qualities of quantity

Why games need more less, and less more



Your brain may be very tired, but the DS's *Brain Training* makes sure its players never are by limiting their sessions to ten minutes a day

Everyone knows why the DS is such a success with non-gamers in Japan. The familiarity of the Nintendo brand, the accessibility of the stylus input, the new approaches of its games – it's now a familiar tale. Except, when you look at its greatest ambassador, *Professor Kawashima's Brain Training* (due for release in the UK in the spring), there's a simple, crucial factor that's easy to overlook: you can play it for only ten minutes at a time.

It's hard to overstate to popularity of the *Brain Training* series – its recent sequel sold 1.5 million copies in its first fortnight on sale. Based on neuroscientist Kawashima's book, it sets out a daily programme to improve mental agility and charts players' progress, and the internal clock ensures that swots can't jump ahead and undermine his little-but-often mantra. Interestingly, the same is true of *Nintendogs*, which limits the number of competitions you can enter and walks you can take each day. Even *Animal Crossing*, which is open for exploration day and night, effectively limits the time you can constructively spend in your village. And this is crucial, because when you ask non-gamers, particularly older non-gamers, why they don't play, one of the commonest answers is that they're uncomfortable investing time in something they see as frivolous. It's not the hardware, it's not even the software: it's the time.

Nor is it just a consideration for non-gamers. Although a favourite, if entirely meaningless, gamer argument is 'how long should games be?', a much more crucial debate is how long should the play sessions which make up a game's lifespan be? At the other end of the spectrum from the DS, this month sees two pioneers of a more hardcore genre – the traditionally long-drawn-out strategy game – make a play for the time-poor. Both *Rise Of Legends* and *Defcon* offer multiplayer modes which can be completed in a lunch hour. Even *Em Enchant Arm*, at first sight a deeply old-fashioned Japanese RPG, gives the player the unlimited saves and rechargable health they need to define their own play times. The time has long since passed when someone's enthusiasm for gaming could be assumed to be commesurate with the free time they have available.



The training Tests of Valor aren't grouped together, but spread through the game; timed challenges that give a better understanding of the game's systems. Without them, Ono says even experienced gamers would need to read the manual





FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOW (JAPAN), MARCH 17 (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E150, E151**

Onimusha: Dawn Of Dreams

The fourth game in the Onimusha trilogy opts for a clean slate – but will the historical fantasy series always have one foot in the past?





"It's almost like a brand new *Onimusha* franchise," claims *Dawn Of Dreams*' producer **Yoshiniro Ono** with a twinkle, going on to list the raft of innovations in this 'extension' of the demon-slaying series that so conspicuously lacks a '4' in its title. He confesses that, returning to resurrect the franchise after a hiatus cultivating pastures new – in the form of *Shadow Of Rome*'s gladiatorial intrigue – he was seized by a bout of soul-searching. How to renovate the traditional samurai action genre? How to forge a fresh start for *Onimusha*, which had always been intended to end with 2004's *Demon Siege*? How to broaden the appeal beyond fans and entice a new, younger generation of players?

The answers were as numerous as the questions. Implement a fully 3D environment with a player-controlled camera. Jettison the tradition for using the likenesses of famous actors – which culminated in Jean Reno appearing in the third game – and replace them with a broader, more colourful cast featuring no less than five playable characters. Introduce an 'ally system' allowing two characters to be used at the same time. Ease the difficulty somewhat, relaxing the combo timing in favour of what Ono calls a "more go-ahead style". Further shift the emphasis off raw skill with tactical and roleplaying elements, and add miniature training missions known as Tests of Valor to help ease new players into the game.

It's a comprehensive agenda, but you don't need to spend long with the game to realise it's not a radical one. Ono, it turns out, had nothing like the same appetite for reinvention as his colleagues across the hall in Production Studio 4. "*Resident Evil 4* went in a totally different direction, it was a complete change of model that denied the whole series. It was like jumping off a cliff," he says. "If both teams had jumped off that cliff together and both died... [laughs] *Onimusha* had to stand by, just in case. This looks different, but when you play it's still *Onimusha*. That's what I wanted to make."

And that's what he appears to have made, which will certainly please the fans, and at face value shouldn't necessarily



The whole of the game's map is free to roam, and since different characters have access to different areas in the usual fashion (Jubei can crawl through holes, Ohatsu has a hookshot, Roberto can break obstacles), backtracking and exploration will be important to progress







As much as *Dawn Of Dreams* has gained from the move to full 3D, it just doesn't look as imposing as some of the previous instalments, with their prerendered backgrounds. And fixed camera perspectives are still far from uncommon







The game begins with a dramatic, unexplained rooftop boss fight, during which Soki assumes a demon form. The story, inscrutable in the early stages, should stand alone for new players while illuminating the *Onimusha* universe for fans

displease anyone else. The fighting is more fluid, but still no picnic, while there seems to be some strength to the assertion that novice players can think their way around tougher battles. "If you're not so nimble with your fingers, you can strategise, use the ally system to get through the situation," claims Ono, and indeed this is most apparent when playing with an AI cohort. You can hotswap between characters at will to manage their reserves of health and Oni magic, and the D-pad instructions – including distract, wait and recover, absorb souls, guard – are useful and responsive. On twoplayer coop, Ono will only say: "We're not going to betray your expectations."

But despite these novelties, indeed because of some of them, *Dawn Of Dreams* still feels like a tremendously old-fashioned game. Ono's argument is that the addition of RPG mechanics will make it much less daunting for unskilled players. As before, weapons and armour can be enhanced by spending souls, but characters can also be customised, earning experience for notable kills and combos, which levels them up and translates into skill points to be spent on upgrading – or further relaxing the timing on – their abilities. Improvement is thus a given, and it's even possible to buy skills for cash. Item combination will ease inventory pressure, and those who (like Ono) struggle with puzzle boxes can break them and get the items inside. There is always, it seems, the option to spend your way out of trouble.

It makes a certain kind of sense, especially, you might argue, in a country where *Dragon Quest* is the ultimate in mainstream entertainment. But to what extent does adding a crust of menu-driven complication really make an action game more accessible? Why are the not especially large or beautiful environments beset with loading? Why are basic actions – picking up an item, opening a door – not animated, and points of interaction marked with gaudy swirls of colour? This *Onimusha* looks like a changed game, but not a new one; it's heavily encumbered with last-generation tropes, the very antithesis of the progressive seamlessness that *RE4* found, to such acclaim, at the bottom of its cliff.

As before, weapons and armour can be enhanced by spending souls, but characters also be customised, earning experience for notable kills and combos

Five Star

Dawn Of Dreams is set in 1596 – 50 years after the previous instalment – and as is tradition roots its supernatural fantasy squarely in historical fact. Ono lays out the details with relish. The 'blue devil' samurai hero Soki is based on a real person, the adopted son of Japan's unifying ruler Hideyoshi, the villain of this piece. He is joined by fleet-footed Jubei of the Yagyu ninja clan (granddaughter of *Onimusha 2*'s Jubei); the gunfighter Ohatsu, another historical figure, niece of warlord and former villain Nobunaga; Tenkai, a monk who fights with a staff and is a legendary figure in Japan; and Roberto, whose presence is a nod to Hideyoshi's slaughter of Spanish missionaries, and whose fist-fighting style is the most radical departure for the series.





Ono feels *Onimusha 3* was too short, and reckons *Dreams* clocks up between 30-40 hours, two-and-a-half of which are CG scenes. "This is something our development team wants to do, it's kind of their passion"

FORMAT: **360, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

Far Cry Instincts: The Next Chapter

Ubisoft continues to bridge the generation gap – and redefine 'prolific' – serving up a double-headed follow-up in six short months



The motorboat seen here on 360 isn't just a bit of authentic local colour – it, along with the other vehicles, has been specifically designed to be useful in multiplayer. This craft can take three passengers, the new truck eight

Even by Ubisoft's standards, it's a fast turnaround. Its Xbox reinterpretation of the PC shooter had barely been out three months when it announced that the next *Far Cry Instincts* was not only in the pipeline, but less than three months away, alongside a bumper-pack conversion of both games to Xbox 360, subtitled *Predator*. Could the French giant, famous for its annual sequels, really be moving to a six-monthly strategy? No. This, argues producer **Bertrand Hélias**, is a special case, and in any event not really a sequel. "I'm happy to call it an expansion," he says, likening it to one of the publisher's updates to its *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* Tom Clancy franchises; and although no pricing strategy has been announced, it seems reasonable to expect a commensurately low price point for the Xbox version.



Hélias' team is concentrating hardest on improving water and vegetation on Xbox 360. Water effects are based on an oceanographic algorithm and aren't purely cosmetic. Work is underway on the feel of the waves during boat sections

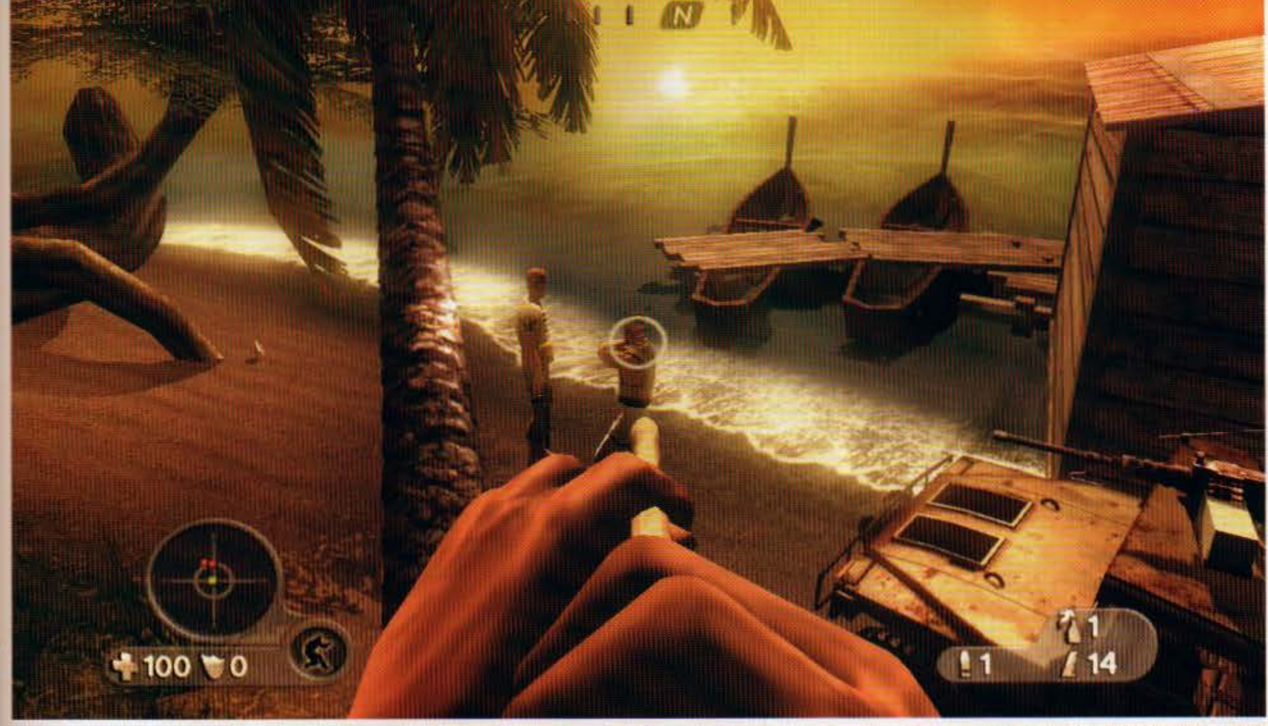
In fact it's a matter of momentum, and of delicate timing. Ubisoft prizes the *Far Cry* brand highly, has been delighted with player feedback on *Instincts*, and expects great things from it in the long run. "We have a good opportunity to build something strong on 360 for a long time," says Hélias, but in the meantime he has an awkward, transitional juggling act to perform. Ubisoft wants to establish *Far Cry* hard and fast on the new platform, while the range of available software, especially strong Live games, is still small. Hence the speedy conversion. But it also wants to keep its burgeoning fanbase – particularly the online multiplayer community – intact, half of which it reckons has deserted Xbox for 360, half of which remains on the old console. And it knows it has to do that without short-changing either group, so the simultaneous release of new content was a must.

Besides fresh maps and a new mode in multiplayer (see 'Map controls'), that content takes the form of a new adventure – currently in search of a subtitle, and referred to simply as 'the next chapter' – in the familiar, vibrant Pacific island setting. Set several years later, it finds Jack Carver trying to live a peaceful life but still in possession of his mutant feral powers. When a girl asks for his backup in a meeting between the head of a pirate clan and the island governor, both are slain by the leader of a local rebel faction and Carver is accused of the murders and hunted down by all concerned. It becomes apparent that some of the rebels also possess feral abilities, setting up the prospect of

More outdoor environments are promised in the new instalment of *Far Cry*, which will also be closer to the PC original in scope, even in the Xbox version pictured here. Where they can't quite offer such spatial freedom due to memory limitations, tactical freedom will be built in

Ubisoft wants to establish Far Cry hard and fast on the new platform, while the range of available software, especially strong Live games, is still small









The use of the feral climbing power to quickly attain lofty sniping positions, as seen in this 360 shot, has the biggest potential impact on gameplay of any of the new episodes' revisions – especially if it's implemented in multiplayer



Map controls

Ubisoft is especially pleased with the ardent reception fans have given to *Far Cry Instincts*' Live game and its map editor, and so isn't planning to skimp on either of these in the updates. The Xbox game will feature eight new maps and a new base-capture team mode, Seeker vs Seeker. The editor will contain new templates and allow maps to be imported from the original *Instincts*. All this, and a much larger map selection, will make its way to 360's *Predator*. As keen as it is push multiplayer on 360, the *Far Cry* team is turning its back on the machine's much-vaunted marketplace. The intention is to use the map editor community to generate new content for the game, with Ubisoft promoting the best efforts for download from its own servers, negating the need for approval from Microsoft.

visceral fights between superpowered, bestial warriors. This is doubly enticing when you consider the vertically minded new powers: climbing, encouraging the use of sheer cliffs and trees as vantage points; and wire-fu-inspired airborne moves. Surprise feral strikes from underwater will also be possible.

New weapons, traps, vehicles and a greater degree of environmental interaction will all feature. We see the improved physics engine being put to good use, with pipe bombs felling guard towers and toppled log piles crushing enemy squads. Aware that *Instincts*' AI was its most heavily criticised element, Ubisoft Montreal is promising an adjustment that will make it more responsive and coordinated, and potentially more challenging, but with the introduction of difficulty levels satisfying, it hopes, all tastes.

We aren't shown the 360 version of this new instalment, and Hélias is evasive when pressed on the differences. It's possible that it will be no more than a straight graphical upgrade, but the same, he insists, is absolutely not true of the adaptation of the original *Instincts* that will form the other half of *Predator*. The level design has been reworked around revised AI and the tremendous depth of field 360 is capable of (Hélias cites a 2km draw distance). The byword is increased intensity: opposition will be smarter, ammo more scarce, headshots harder, maps more expansive and furnished with heavier cover for more tactical battles.

With a game that makes such a powerful visual statement – and that boasts such famously spectacular PC parentage – many will be more interested in the graphical impact of this port, and it's hard to blame them. The jury is still out. The intensity of the colour is astonishing, the definition and depth of the vistas remarkable, the shimmering water effects almost surreal in their impossible clarity. But the extra resolution exposes some of the vegetation to more scrutiny than it can bear, and there's a slight sterility, a coldness to the light, that is in stark contrast to the thick, steaming atmosphere of the Xbox code.

Another pass on textures and effects could easily fix this, though, and even if it doesn't, with its two games and 24 multiplayer maps *Predator* should represent good value, even at the 360's inflated prices. The new Xbox episode is a stranger proposition. There's nothing to say it won't be every bit as strong as the original *Instincts*, but it's hard to see it as anything more than preaching to the converted. Maybe that's all it's intended to be – a staging post – and maybe that doesn't matter. Because if nothing else, you can be sure that Ubisoft has much bigger plans than this in store for *Far Cry*.





It's remarkable how little the Xbox version (screenshots above) is outshone by its 360 big brother, which is more of a tribute to the old machine than a slight on the new one. Yes, the textural edges might be a little rough, but the lavish effects succeed in tying together a convincingly organic in-game landscape







Another example of spatial and graphical sleight-of-hand are the portals (above right): 2D rifts in space that provide a clear view through to the architecture and models on the other side. They can even be shot through

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **3D REALMS/HUMAN HEAD**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q2**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

Prey

A decade since its conception, 3D Realms' sci-fi actioner is very nearly ready to turn the FPS world upside down

Prey may only have been in the public eye since last year's E3, but it's a concept that was first kicked around at 3D Realms as early as 1996, and that went into development at Human Head in 2001 (an early decision to licence the then-nascent Doom 3 engine pretty much condemning it to being a slow-burner). For all its cutting-edge technology, it shows. Stylistically, *Prey* looks very much like the last five years – specifically the likes of *Far Cry* and *FEAR* – never happened. Its looks are dishearteningly generic, all neon highlights, steel blast doors and bulked-up body-horror. The alien weapons too, despite their organic looks, functionally stick to tried-and-tested archetypes, although some at least pack several archetypes in one. But, for once, this is an FPS that isn't purely about your gun and the face you're pointing it at.

An alien-abduction epic, *Prey* casts the player as Tommy, a reluctant Native American hero trying to save himself and his girlfriend from the gigantic organic spacecraft – a sentient Dyson sphere powered by the artificial sun inside its shell – that is strip-mining the Earth for human food. This craft is both the chief opponent and the chief setting of the game. It's an intelligence that interacts and toys with Tommy, either directly or through its human drones and animal antibodies, but is also a fascinating spatial construct straight out of hard sci-fi.

Here, there is no up, an idea Human Head is exploiting brilliantly with sticky wall and ceiling walkways, switches that change the gravity orientation of a room, outer space exploration in shuttle-pods and even the inclusion of small asteroids within the sphere with their own gravity fields. Experimenting with these elements and their permutations in some superbly designed deathmatch arenas is surprisingly instinctive, visually thrilling, and all the refreshment the game's tired look needs. Even better, the potential they represent for both dramatic staging and cerebral spatial puzzles in the singleplayer game is immense.

Prey's other USP is the very opposite of physical. The ghost of Tommy's grandfather, killed in the abduction, intervenes to persuade the callow youth to embrace his mystical, ancestral birthright: a spirit form that allows him to leave his body, cross spirit bridges and attack enemies with a spectral bow. It's questionable whether the game will have the delicacy (and it certainly doesn't have the voice acting) to handle Tommy's supernatural route to racial self-discovery without condescension, but it's a sound, thoughtful design twist (with intriguing ramifications for multiplayer) of the sort so often forgotten when games look down the barrel of a gun, and it's one of several such in *Prey*. So if its presentation is a little crass – and fundamentally as crudely middle-American as those gurning monsters and the Heart and Blue Oyster Cult songs on the soundtrack – that, in a stale genre, would be a small price to pay.

As you like it?

Like *King Kong*, *Prey* eschews difficulty settings in favour of a live adaptive system – notably with item cabinets that dispense according to players' needs and how well they've been doing. Given that enemies are just as aware of health packs, and as able to use them, as Tommy is, this could be a godsend, but you have to wonder how well it will be received by the hardcore PC shooter audience, as opposed to *Kong's* broad popular market (which was never intended to notice it in the first place). Replays on stringent difficulty settings have become something of a tradition for genre fans, and they might just feel robbed of a standard to measure themselves against.





Human Head is keen to stress that, while *Prey* plays out almost entirely within the sphere, it won't just consist of corridors like this one. There will be wide-open bays and space sections, too





The shuttle-pod's controls are simple and its inertia isn't too pronounced. Its tractor beam might be the most entertaining way to get deathmatch kills, unless you're blowing opponents so far off asteroids they reach orbit



As is typical for a modern-day Japanese RPG, players collect and nurture a menagerie of creatures – golems – that can be added to the active battle party line-up, some of which take up more than one slot. As you would expect, Xbox Live functionality is also present

Em Enchant Arm

Xbox made its name on the back of traditional western play styles; will a traditional eastern take buffer 360's?

"It's an RPG, so we're thinking it would be inevitable that we release it on two discs," said producer **Masanori Takeuchi** some months prior to Xbox 360's debut. "But to be honest, even that's looking grim." And now, with *Enchant Arm* available in Japan, it's arrived on just one disc. Whether it was an attention-grabbing soundbite or not, there's something stuttered about *Enchant Arm*'s game opening compared to the billowing CGI scene-setting of typical RPGs. In the opening hour of play, its cutscenes are few, with key points covered by short intermissions of fully voiced, face-to-face dialogue between character models. Interior locations and shops that branch off the first major play area – a bustling festival – aren't even rendered, merely represented by a character on a static backdrop.

Still, trying to decide whether there are gaps in *Enchant Arm*'s production, imaginary or otherwise, is perhaps a moot pursuit as the game itself in play doesn't feel cropped. And its opening stretch is sparkling, a series of bright locations that brim with life and ambience, beginning in the university environs of student protagonist Atsuma. Indeed, the aforementioned street festival is as alive as anything in the more populated city districts of *Final Fantasy X* and *X-2*, despite the slightly cold sheen of its rendering. It's an atmosphere that bounces well off its soundtrack, with light and airy instrumentation that's far from saccharine. The shimmer on some textures is a little too glaring, though, much like those of Rare's 360 launch pair, and some portions of the landscape – such as the flowerbeds of the college gardens or the podgy balloons that litter the festival – simply look unfinished. Overall, though, its look is a crisp and effective one that's proud to be bright and colourful.

The soundtrack is subtle and unobtrusive, but its battle tune is as overwrought as that of a boss fight. This only sticks out due to the first few hours being so easy; enchanter Touya, in particular, seems more powerful than the rest of the lead trio

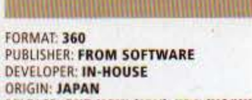




Cutscenes are mostly dialogue-driven chatter, featuring enthusiastic gesticulation from their participants. The tone feels lively and comedic, something that seems to be worthy of a decent localisation to preserve its gaudy characters, and could easily be deflated by some thoughtlessly throaty action-hero behaviour

Battles are random, turn-based and staged on a pair of neighbouring 3x4 grids, one for allies and one for enemies, meaning your paths never cross. Your characters, up to a team of four, are moved around and a skill is chosen for them to perform, each of which has its own *Disgaea*-like pattern of effect. And nothing is executed until all characters have been issued orders, before unleashing a typically From Software lightshow of explosive lighting and effervescent shapes. The battles themselves are of high frequency, but a well-executed 'auto' command helps to speed things up.

Still, if arriving on just one disc adds weight to the chance of a western release – it's certainly a game that feels worthy of it, and seems highly capable of plugging the trad RPG gap until Mistwalker's produce arrives (and, incidentally, it's not region free) – then all the better.



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **FROM SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JPN), TBA (US/UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E152**



Pizza head

With the games sharing the same producer, its no surprise to see *Otogi*'s rich art style resurfacing in *Enchant Arm*. The personalities of the main characters could well play second fiddle to their wild costumes (think space-age extreme-sport school uniforms) – and, in the case of reedy Makoto, his use of a gaudy, spiral saxophone as a weapon – while battle skills are nearly always accompanied by an outrageous flare of effects. And, within moments of exploring the game, the player is faced with a street entertainer with a body of glowing prisms and a fast-food vendor with a pizza for a head. Characters from other From Software productions on Xbox – *Murakumo*, *Metal Wolf Chaos*, *Otogi* and *Thousand Land* – are also lined up to appear throughout.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NCSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **NETDEVIL**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **APRIL**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E154**

Auto Assault



Will the bleak climes of NCSoft's mad mad Mad Max world be a petrolhead paradise or a social wasteland? Or both?



Racial tension

***Auto Assault*'s scenario presents an Earth ravaged by dirty bombs from a mysterious alien aggressor. These created a race of mutants and drove humans underground; the humans birthed a race of hardy biomechanical hybrids (biomeks) to exterminate the mutants, then attempted to cleanse the contamination and both subspecies by nuking the entire planet. They failed, and now emerge to attempt to reclaim the surface. The character classes have exact analogues between races – soldier, repair, commander and stealth operative – so the main distinguishing feature between races is their Hazard Mode, a destructive superpower on a cooldown timer. Biomeks' ability to transform into a giant robot when Hazard Mode is activated is sure to make them a popular race.**

If it was NetDevil's intention with its post-apocalyptic vehicular MMORPG to create an experience that didn't feel remotely like an RPG, then it already looks like it's succeeded. As online worlds go, *Auto Assault* is an astonishingly dynamic, fast-paced, physical experience. The deep scoops, ramps and rubble mountains of its desolate landscape make the best of a superb, gently exaggerated physics engine that allows buildings to be (temporarily) brought down, and players to bump into and scramble over each other. The vehicle handling, despite being shackled to WASD keys, is also excellent, mustering both heft and bounce, responsiveness and momentum.

Although items and class-specific skills do come into play, combat is as much about control and timing as anything else: left-click to select a target, line it up in your onscreen firing arcs and right-click to fire all weapons – but keep moving at all costs. Including an experience-point multiplier for quick successive kills – explicitly splicing classical arcade mechanics with the very building blocks of the RPG, encouraging bloody runs through forests of infantry – is a stroke of brilliant, brazen cheek. After playing *Auto Assault*, a traditional MMO space can feel static and staid.

And it's just as well, because one of the chief reasons for playing an MMO is to spend time in a place you want to be, and it's hard to imagine many people wanting to be in the Central Wastelands. This is a world utterly unrelieved by beauty or inspiration, a half-hearted cliché rendered in filthy greys and reds and sickly radioactive green. There's only so much ugliness the scenario can excuse.

NetDevil is risking disappointing subscribers' requirements of an online world in far less superficial ways than the visual, however. The intensity and speed of play tends to dampen any communication between players – there just doesn't seem to be time to talk. Even worse, group play is a tactics-free, directionless fracas. It's certainly more entertaining and forgiving than playing alone, but it's impossible to coordinate or strategise, or indeed to see any pressing reason to. Unforgivably, it's currently not even possible to share mission objectives between members of a convoy.

Having only played through the initial levels in a tightly restricted early beta test, it would be dangerous to jump to conclusions – this, after all, is a genre where games can only reveal their full selves after many hours of play. We haven't begun to explore the intriguing crafting system (which centres on the reverse-engineering of broken items), and can only assume that the three races' and four character classes' playing styles, virtually indistinguishable to begin with, will diverge over time. Perhaps instanced environments will force team dynamics to the surface, too. But as it stands, *Auto Assault* could end up being an unusual and entertainingly direct MMO enjoyed by players at the same time, in the same place, but fundamentally alone.



***Auto Assault*'s code is currently such a glutton for resources that it can easily cripple a quite respectable machine on all but the lowest settings. This would be easier to forgive if the game was more graphically becoming, and we can only hope for optimisation**



The humanoid avatars sported in towns are utterly charmless, and their animation is pitiful. The option to own and decorate your own apartment is welcome, but we don't trust NetDevil to design wallpaper





***Auto Assault* is refreshingly free of any significant death penalty beyond a short drive. When their cars are incapacitated, players are airlifted straight to the nearest repair station (above) where they can get a full repair free of charge, and usually stock up on any spent items too**



The player's reticule gives feedback on their current level of visibility, turning red when levelled on an NPC who's aware of them. It dims in accordance with just how deeply in the shadows the player is tucked



The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

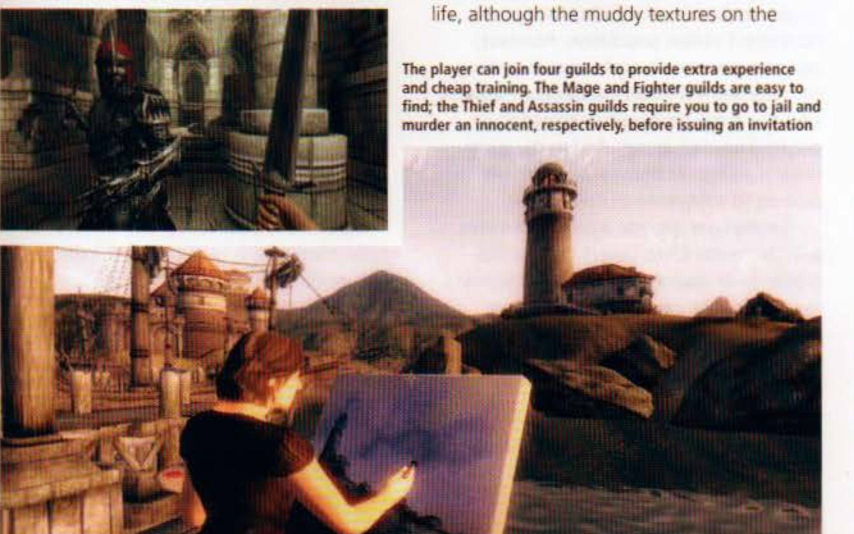
Bethesda's obese free-roaming RPG series gets leaner – but not necessarily meaner – while putting on some serious weight

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **TAKE TWO**
DEVELOPER: **BETHESDA SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E155**

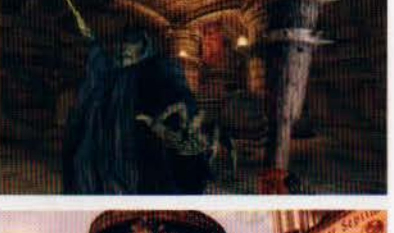
In the clockwork worlds of the *Elder Scrolls* RPGs, where things move at whatever pace the player decides, a realtime concern such as physics is one that may seem peripheral to the myriad sheets of stats. But it's there, and it's instantly tangible, adding some worthy solidity to *Oblivion*'s massive landmass (see 'Ragdollies').

Spend a few hours with *Oblivion*'s opening and you'll likely find yourself exploring it in a suitably non-linear daze. The world feels far less harsh on the player's initial steps than *Morrowind*, at least at first glance. First glances are usually folly when it comes to *Elder Scrolls* games, but *Oblivion* is one that stands up well to initial impressions, even on 360. Any Xbox owners dissuaded by the discouraging and insufficient conversion of *Morrowind* are being offered something far more in line with the look of its PC equivalent this time around, despite the game appearing at roughly the same point in the console's lifespan; the hazy shadows and pretty palette of the game's tutorial sewer area are proof enough of that. And once that's completed, the player is thrust into *Oblivion*'s countryside, a widescreen view that tempts the player to abandon their quest and simply explore. It feels like true countryside, too, thick and rich with plant life, although the muddy textures on the crests of distant hills are a lone blemish on this striking scene. For those who choose not to play in firstperson, thirdperson animation is an improvement, though your character still holds a single pose throughout a jump.





The player can join four guilds to provide extra experience and cheap training. The Mage and Fighter guilds are easy to find; the Thief and Assassin guilds require you to go to jail and murder an innocent, respectively, before issuing an invitation





When an Oblivion gate opens – a passage to a hellish otherworld that's fundamental to the plot – the skies turn a deep, suffocating red, and the whole landscape descends into an overcast crimson, an atmospheric touch

A new and seemingly blunt change of design soon becomes apparent: certain plot-essential NPCs cannot be killed, only knocked unconscious. In *Morrowind*, key characters could be slaughtered and the plotline severed, but the player was warned and the quest could still be completed. The reason for this change? Thanks to the 'Radiant' AI that allows every NPC to live a varied and responsive life whether or not the player is around to see it happen, these essential plot players would often get themselves killed via misadventure. So, rather than stem this behaviour, Bethesda made them immortal.

Only one thing is truly clear at this point: a few hours is nowhere near enough time to get a true gauge on whether *Oblivion*'s streamlining – convenient menus, fast travel, a reaction-based speechcraft minigame and numerous other welcome mats for those intimidated by *Morrowind*'s unwieldy girth – has done anything more for the game's complexity than simply repackaged it.

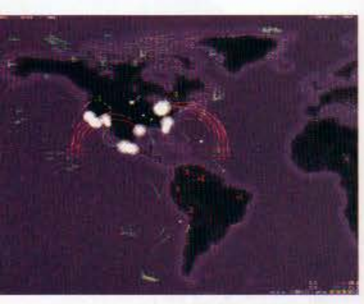


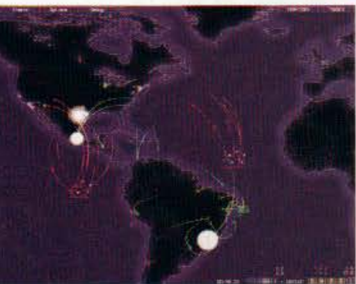
Ragdollies

The presence of an elaborate physics system is hardly an innovation, but it proves to be surprisingly entertaining within the otherwise sober climes of *Oblivion*. Players can pick up dead bodies, props or even whole sets of bones, and flail them around foolishly, but there's also a practical application: holding up a mud crab, say, can shield the player from incoming arrows, which can then be plucked from the corpse if they're an archer in need of ammunition. A similarly neat touch occurs when the player is hit with arrows, which will then enter their inventory.



The 360 version features the maximum number of Achievements – 50. They're spread around sensibly, unlocked by story progression and by attaining ranks of growing seniority in guilds and the arena





FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **INTROVERSION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **APRIL 2006**

Defcon

Introversion turns its attention from evolution to destruction. Shall we play a game of spot the inspiration?

If a picture is sometimes worth a thousand words, a screenshot can occasionally tell you as much as an entire design document. One look at that blueprint globe and those Morse-code missile trails brings back a flood of memories of 1983, fading Cold War paranoia and Matthew Broderick's fledging career as a chirpy troublemaker.

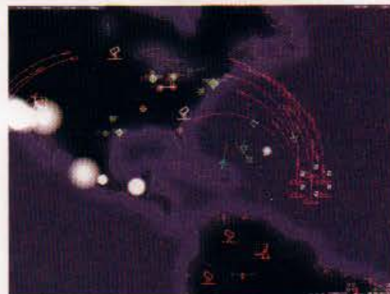
And those memories wouldn't be far out. *Defcon*'s simple intention is to let you play your own game of global thermonuclear war, both against the PC and up to five human opponents. The core of the game is simple – to begin, you distribute your units (drawn from six main types – submarines, destroyers, ground silos, etc) across your territory, hidden from your opponents. Then comes the simple, but not so simple, task of scoping out your enemy's positions without letting them scope out yours. Once you're confident you've got the edge, you attack, with the single, despicable aim of decimating your opponent's civilian population. However, half-measures won't work, since launching your missiles will reveal the location of your silos and subs, leaving you exposed to a crushing counter-attack. And so the game flicks in an instant from cautious, covert probing to a firestorm of neon nukes.

Singleplayer pits you against a bot (see p18 for creator Chris Delay's take on the challenge of teaching an AI the real winning moves), but the game is geared around multiplayer, which gives control over a continent to each player. While it encourages alliances, each player is still fighting an individual battle to protect their own population: there's no such thing as good collateral damage. Most games last in the region of 45 minutes, but for those who want to take it slower there's a closer-to-realtime Office mode. This silences the game, and minimises it in your system tray. Set your subs and bombers on hours-long routes to the other side of the world, and it's likely you won't need to worry about them until lunch. Alerts ('You have new fallout'-style) will notify you of any incoming attacks, but even intercontinental missiles may take half-an-hour to hit, giving you time to finish a phone call and a spreadsheet before you retaliate.

Until Introversion parts with a playable build, there's no way to be sure if *Defcon* can deliver the atmospherics of its inspiration – although *Uplink* proved Delay the master of '80s-inspired minimalist geek paranoia. Another concern is whether one world map and six unit types can deliver enough tactical variety, and if the scoring system can be refined to deliver satisfying victories rather than stalemates or flukes. But with such a pared-down game, these issues form the primary focus of remaining development, meaning there's no reason to assume they won't be addressed, allowing *Defcon* to deliver on its pictorial promises.



These early screens can't do justice in print to the colour clarity and fine detail apparent when these tranquil, digital megadeaths are glowing on your command screen



The game's visual inspiration is clear, but hopefully the style it feeds from has become sufficiently generic to keep Introversion out of any painfully hot legal water

Silent running

One of *Darwinia*'s greatest strengths was its soundscape, overseen by Alistair Lindsay. He's at work again on *Defcon*, but the team is taking a typically imaginative approach to the soundtrack. Despite the iconographic appearance of the unit types, it's not intended for each to have a distinctive sound effect. Instead the game will generate music to accompany each battle, which will potentially be reduced to eerie silence by the rumble of nuclear attacks. It's a bold move, but could lend the game real individuality.



Brown's tireless tracking (below) is charismatic, and after rescuing him from two fates worse than death it's not hard to feel attached. Unlike *Haunting Ground*'s canine relationship, though, you're not required to keep up his trust and health







The Aristocrats, and attendant lost boys, make for devilish NPCs – with intentionally impenetrable moods that swing from glacial disinterest one meeting to fuming the next

Rule Of Rose

Sony's Girl's Own horror story suggests that sugar, spice and all things nice may not be an accurate ingredients list

Jennifer, unwilling heroine of *Rule Of Rose*, has fallen in with the kind of crowd her mother warned her about: the kind that would lure her into the wilds of 1930s England, ritually humiliate her and bury her alive. And that's all in *Rose*'s opening half-hour – after which she regains consciousness in the groaning, creaking bowels of a Zeppelin, finding herself a galley slave of the Red Crayon Aristocrats' Club.

Spiteful, duplicitous and quite possibly murderous in the way only children can be, the Aristocrats demand monthly tribute, a series of chapter-by-chapter goals along the journey of understanding Jennifer's place in this fairytale gone awry. She's aided by an equally abused dog, Brown, who provides a likable twist to adventure progression: while you're still led through the game by the nose, it's by the canine's nose. Most items can be offered to him to scent, and then finding their connecting item or receptacle is a matter of following his determined snuffling and scratching.

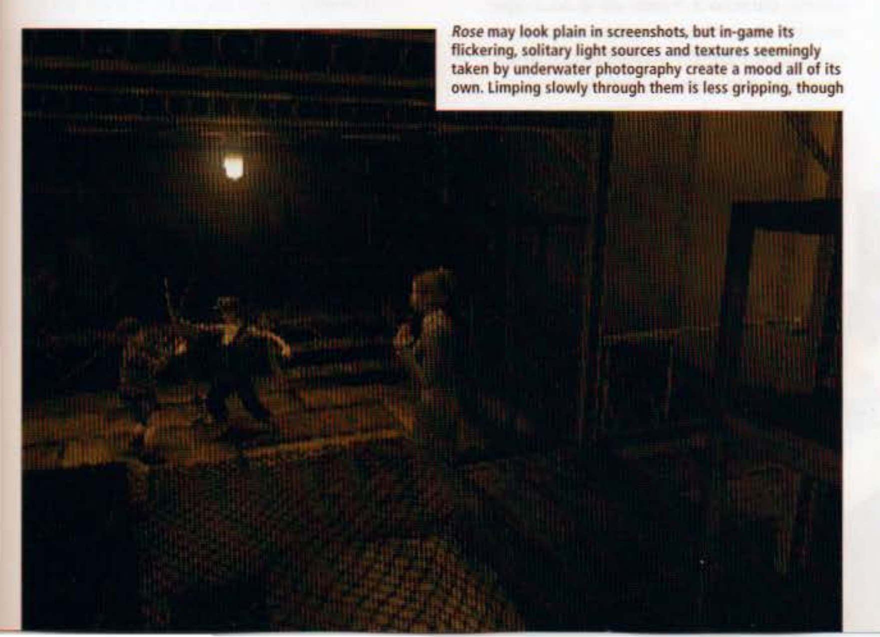
Rose's wild-child premise, riffing on Barrie and Golding in equal measure, crackles with menace and unexpected perversions, but unfortunately the setting isn't the only mustily historic aspect of the game. This is a survival horror that never grew up, the process of fumbling through the dark from one event trigger to the next making something like *Killer 7*'s ruthless streamlining seem all the more inspired. Combat is such an awkward, joyless routine even by the subterranean standards of the genre that its inclusion at all is doubly disappointing. After all the possibilities the setting evokes, locking Jennifer in a room until milling enemies have been bludgeoned with an iron bar is particularly cheap and artless.



Enemies appear in force, and it's seldom clear whether laboriously killing them all will allow you to move on, or trigger a respawn of the whole bunch. Their diminutive nature cleverly sets up the first boss encounter, though: while only adult-sized, he seems disarmingly gigantic

It seems unlikely the two sides of the game's personality – the prickly exploration of hierarchical childish cruelty, and the more abject cruelty of flailing boss fights – will comfortably reconcile, making the experience dependent on how stubbornly determined you are to enjoy it. There's a deep seam of unease to be mined by the dedicated, but progression feels too fraught for adventure gamers and too plodding for survival horror hounds – seemingly following a trend of SCEI original titles produced on conceptual whimsy, without thought to form or appeal. To the credit of *Rose*'s atmosphere, it can almost pull off the sensation that the contrasts are intentional: a double-dare to see its genre concessions as the Aristocrats' madness rather than failings of design.

That's possibly too generous a reading to justify a western release, although the voice acting and illustrative text are already in English (much of the dialogue is written Japanese, however). Originally it appeared that *Rose*'s daring themes would limit its chances for localisation, but in the end it may be the lack of risk-taking in the game itself that locks it away as an import-only curiosity piece.



Rose may look plain in screenshots, but in-game its flickering, solitary light sources and textures seemingly taken by underwater photography create a mood all of its own. Limping slowly through them is less gripping, though

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEI**
DEVELOPER: **PUNCHLINE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**





No joke

Rule Of Rose's dichotomies extend even further outward to its developer, Punchline. Like its sister company, *Chibi Robo* developer Skip, Punchline was born from the ashes of Lovedelic – the house whose strictly pacifist manifesto defined such cult PlayStation import oddities as *Moon* and *Lack Of Love*. These principles were heavily apparent in Punchline's first PS2 adventure, *Chulip*, with its goal of collecting an innocent kiss from every in-game NPC – making *Rose*'s underlying salaciousness that much more knowingly disturbing.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **GHOST RECON TIWAK, RED STORM**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE, US**
RELEASE: **MARCH 31**

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter

The tides seem to be turning for a game that finally, in singleplayer at least, lives up to its title



The implementation of a weapon memory is worthwhile, allowing your current and previously selected weapons to be toggled back and forth. By quickening your style of play, it prepares you for the fiercer fight the game presents



The very idea of a mainstream military simulation suggests friction, if not contradiction, between realism and accessibility. If we need a case study, then *Full Spectrum Warrior* is a worthy candidate. A game that attempted to reconcile those two elements but instead became stuck in between, it depicted a believable environment, real technology and a genuine sense that a single bullet could kill. But in moving from army training tool to commercial release, its resolve to portray that unifying characteristic of all wars – unpredictability – was broken. Despite an efficient interface and streamlined systems, it couldn't chance alienating the casual gamer with authentic chaos.

Ubisoft's TIWAK team, however, might well have taken the chance with *Advanced Warfighter*. There are moments in its preview build when the procedures and precautions of a manoeuvre must be surrendered to blind luck. Bounding as your unit lays down fire on opposition, for example, is a gamble of high risk and high reward because no such cover is truly impregnable. Oncoming troops seldom beat prescribed paths to fixed emplacements, instead charging on foot and screeching their vehicles to within feet of your precariously fortified team. It's in these moments of blind panic that the game thrills rather than pleases. Let's just hope they're features rather than bugs.

Such concern is good news in itself, of course, because it means we're no longer worried about how the game looks. A convincing trait of this build is that despite low-resolution textures, high levels of clipping and a spectrum of glitches, it's still quite a sight – the aftermath of a new-generation console emptying its entire magazine of visual tricks at a high-definition screen. Streets jammed with detail surrender to multilayered veils of heat, bursts of sunlight bathe them in HDR glare and a variable noise filter dirties the eye through which you see them. And on that latter point, TIWAK has taken a refreshing approach that bucks a dubious trend.

Warfighter's plan for its HUD is not to dispose of it completely, but to integrate it convincingly. It introduces a visor that no longer feels like some acetate wall between the player and the action. The impact of a bullet or explosion – or radio interference – will jar it into a blur that merges it at once with the game. The effect is striking. With a few artistic tweaks it could be spellbinding.

The game's now tantalisingly close to realising (at least most of) that E3 forecast, but it's frustratingly difficult to form a concrete judgement. With so much of its success resting on the balance struck between precise systems, it's impossible to praise the moments outlined here without wondering if they'll even make it to shop shelves. One safe assumption is that *Advanced Warfighter* will at least look the part. Considering its recent journey, that's nothing to be scoffed at.



Fans of the urban shootout in Heat will feel a familiar twinge during those moments when their Ghost squad finds itself exposed. Watching your AI allies pick out separate targets with maximum prejudice as civilian vehicles gradually disintegrate is a rush indeed, as is the knowledge that potentially fatal bullets are darting past

In a game substantially removed from its predecessors, one of the biggest departures concerns strategy. In the current build, there are few occasions where you fire the first shot, the emphasis being shifted from stealth to survival. Enemy AI remains particularly eagle-eyed



Divide and conquer

An inevitable peculiarity of *Advanced Warfighter* was that its solo and multiplayer components – the latter by original *GR* developer Red Storm, the former by TIWAK in France – would offer substantially different experiences. It seemed unlikely from the outset that the footage suggested at E3 would be possible in a splitscreen scenario, or even via network, and the visual modesty of this build's multiplayer is conspicuous if unsurprising. Despite the addition (albeit with altered function) of the singleplayer drone, the coop and deathmatch modes evoke a familiarity that's uncharacteristic of the overall project. Those happy with an update rather than a transformation may still, at least, find something to cheer about in the tweaked mechanics, abundant modes and new weapons.





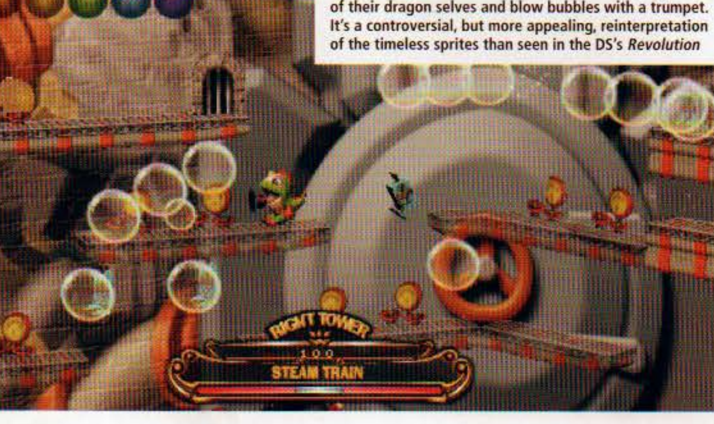
FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **RISING STAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **MARVELOUS INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

Bubble Bobble Evolution

Rising Star proves that a two-screen display isn't a prerequisite when it comes to rehashing Taito's hits



In a weirdly postmodern touch, instead of being transformed, the urchins Bub and Bob don cosplay outfits of their dragon selves and blow bubbles with a trumpet. It's a controversial, but more appealing, reinterpretation of the timeless sprites than seen in the DS's *Revolution*



For its *Revolution* of *Rainbow Islands*, Rising Star Games has used the DS's touchscreen to graft a new control system on to an otherwise intact Taito classic. For its PSP adaptation of *Bubble Bobble*, however, it's doing the reverse: taking a gameplay mechanic of proven brilliance and building an all-new, and profoundly different, game around it.

Evolution is a heavily puzzle-oriented platformer, much more studied and intricate, and much less frantic than its inspiration. Bub and Bob, who can be switched between at will, must first climb and then descend the two towers of a castle, one in each tower. Each of the ten cylindrical floors consists of three themed rooms, folded around a central spindle and connected by doors opened by bubble-operated switches – this is *Bubble Bobble* springing into the third dimension like a scene in a pop-up book.

Progress will mostly be achieved by manipulating the environmental properties of each room, such as temperature, air pressure, gravity, and air currents. A frozen key might have to be trapped in a bubble and moved from a winter to a summer room to thaw it; a lofty platform reached by hitting a switch in another room to turn the floor upside down. Traditional bubble types such as fire and water will have to be created with items and effects, while new oblong and yo-yo bubble types further extrapolate the bewildering range of possibilities.

At this stage, *Evolution*'s interactions feel a little too laborious, its ruleset too involved and the ability to level-up Bub and Bob seems an elaboration too far. But the simple tutorial puzzles we've seen aren't the best showcase for the designers' imagination, and they have abundant raw materials to work with. *Evolution* is certainly a charming original, and an interesting new direction for this old warhorse. Only time will tell if it's as clever as it is complex.



The camera can be zoomed out to give a view of the stage, and an understanding of how the three flat rooms fit together. Enemies are few in the early levels; its not yet clear if the action will intensify along with the puzzles

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BIG HUGE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MAY (US) Q2 (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E158**

Rise Of Legends

An early look at the conflict between magic and technology reveals a happy side-effect: wonder

Of all the legends that Big Huge Games draws on, one its game most strongly evokes is the legendary – sceptics might say mythical – period when PC software wasn't looked upon as the staid cousin of console whimsy. Even incomplete, *Rise Of Legends*' production design shows that invention isn't just an action button.

Though continuing many design themes from 2003's realtime/turn-based strategy hybrid *Rise Of Nations*, *ROL* no longer tracks your nation through the ages, instead handing you control at its peak. The preview showcases two opposing mindsets: the industrial Vinci – ever the traditionalists – erect heavily defended bases and rely on inexorable garrisoning of territory, while the desert nomad Alin are fleeting, able to set summoning points far from their citadels to stage guerrilla strikes. Vinci industry funds upgrades to increase the staying power of their expensive battalions, while Alin alchemy increases resource-gathering potential to offset their troops' expendability.

As its concept demands, *Rise Of Legends* is becoming a game of subtle, smart and defining difference (explaining the drop in nations from *Rise Of Nations*' largely similar 18 to first four, and now three). Even within a nation, a network of complementary abilities that recalls Magic: The Gathering as much as *Command & Conquer* encourages exploration of the technology tree's branches, not just a scramble for the top. It's fast too, with a gently accelerated pace and well-judged (optional) autonomy seldom leaving you waiting.

Elements remain to be judged, not least the effect super-developed third nation the Coatl will have on the balance. On current showing, *ROL* is both mechanically rigorous and magically surprising.




As ever, it all comes down to screen-shaking battle, but multiple unit abilities and supporting bonuses provide an underlying order to what can look like chaos on the field



FORMAT: **360, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT ROMANIA**
ORIGIN: **ROMANIA**
RELEASE: **MARCH (XBOX), Q1 (360)**

Blazing Angels: Squadrons Of WWII

Will unseen depth emerge as release day nears, or is it a case of trouble and strafe for Ubisoft Romania?





With the HUD removed (in this build at least), the sole reliable indicator of your health is a plume of smoke that promptly turns to flame as you reach critical condition. Few of *Angels'* systems get any more complex than this

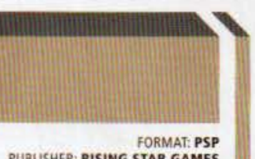




A game like *Blazing Angels* has no right to be important, yet at this moment, on Xbox 360 at least, it's significant. Simple and repetitive even at a glance, it nonetheless reveals much about a previous unknown: what we can expect of very average games in the HD era. What we've seen is too proficient to suggest a bog-standard port, and too uninspired to suggest much more. It's also quite adept at making the visual magic of new hardware seem ordinary. Motion blur claws back the edges of the screen, ground scenery bears a familiar plastic sheen, the sky is crisp and pretty, and the increased retention of visual clutter means that the air clogs with smoke as battles progress.

But if its aesthetic can be subdued and ethereal in one instance (when fighting above London, for example), it's entirely predictable in others. Certain 360 titles are achieving heightened levels of immersion through near-invisible HUDs, but here the same trick suggests gimmickry. After all, the game's spectacle seems mild and its action basic, its visual detail conveying little that would normally require an onscreen gauge, bar or counter because few such details exist. Your plane catches fire when your health is critical, and that's about it. Navigation has been largely delegated to a right trigger lock that fixes the camera on your nearest target, but while it aids the game's cinematography, it's certainly no radar substitute.

The proposition for aerial combat is one that'll strike a chord with players of the similarly arcadey *Rogue Squadron* (though obviously the sci-fi trappings that played to that series' advantage are unavailable here). Knowing of Ubisoft's involvement (as North American distributor) in IR Guru's *Heroes Of The Pacific*, it's even possible that this game has been dumbed down to avoid contention. Its cycle of intercept, attack and reacquire may not be as relentless and rigid in the final game as it is here, but the level of complexity shouldn't be far removed. *Blazing Angels* appears to do little of consequence and little to offend, but will that be too little to justify its price?



Pilot Academy

The first true handheld flight sim seems to be in safe hands at Kuju, but it's our thumbs we're worried about

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **RISING STAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **KUJU ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN/UK**
RELEASE: **APRIL**

There are only 20 aircraft, but the selection has been made with care and an eye for variety. It includes the Spitfire, Sopwith Camel, 747, F-117 stealth, F-14 Tomcat, A10 Tankbuster and our personal choice, the thundering Hercules transport



This lightweight flight sim evolved from the popular Japanese console series *Pilot Ni Narou!* (*Let's Become A Pilot!*), but although producer Junichi Kutusuzawa still holds the reins, development duties have been assumed by Kuju's Sheffield studio. The team there is hoping to not just retain the games' accessibility and wide appeal, but to increase them in the transition to PSP.

The controls are necessarily and reassuringly slim; the analogue slider is the stick, while Triangle and Square control the throttle and the shoulder buttons the rudder (though in the default assisted flight mode, you'll barely need to use either of these). Nevertheless, with no *Ace Combat*-style correction, no digital option and very fine control sensitivity – all understandable stipulations in what is still a pure flight title – it casts an unforgiving spotlight on the PSP's famously twitchy slider, and may be initially off-putting to many.

Not so the classy, minimalist frontend (so very PSP), nor, thankfully, the structure and mission design, which seem much less dry and exacting than is usual in a flight sim. Missions, roughly ten minutes in length, divide into civilian and military paths: the former shows plenty of imagination in its conception, with scenarios such as crop-dusting or flying a 747 through tornadoes while maintaining passenger comfort. Meanwhile, Challenges offer a minute-long burst of surreal, score-attack play: barnstorming, corkscrewing through hoops, playing darts with fighter jets. The package is rounded out with multiplayer (team-based dogfights, and a sort of aerial game of tag) and the eminently sensible inclusion of an unrestricted Free Flight mode.





The aircraft are well modelled and move convincingly, but firstperson view can be drab. The three huge (64km^2) terrains are sparsely furnished and coarsely textured

There's much to suggest that *Pilot Academy* will be one of the most sensitive adaptations of flight simulation this side of *PilotWings*, but it begs the question: did they pick the right console?

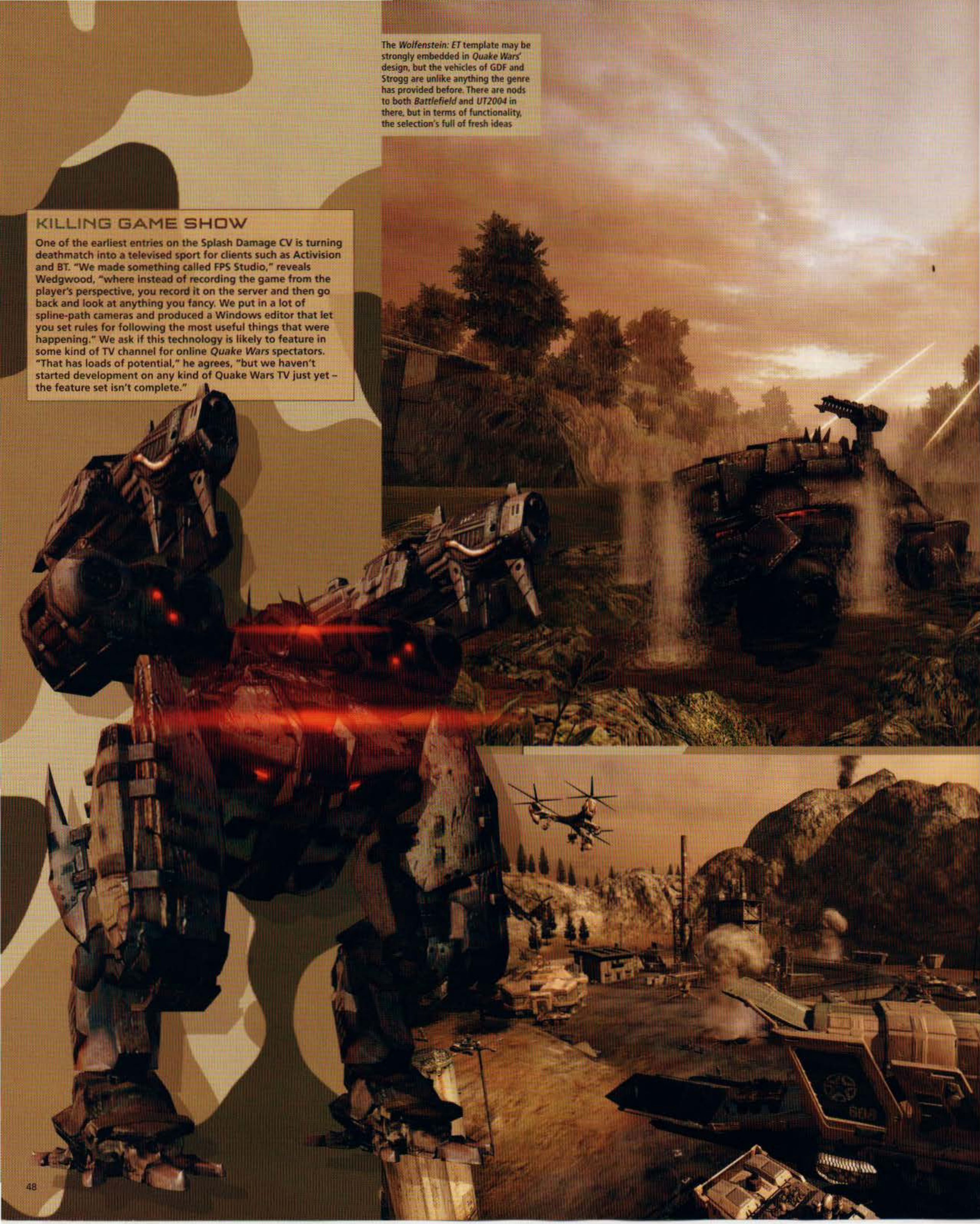

BATTLE
QUAKE 4 MAY HAVE RE-STROGGIFIED MUCH OF THE DEATHMATCH MARKET, BUT



FIELD EARTH

ONE ONLINE BATTLEFIELD REMAINS STRICTLY HUMAN. ENTER BROMLEY-BASED SPLASH DAMAGE WITH ID'S REMARKABLE SECRET WEAPON

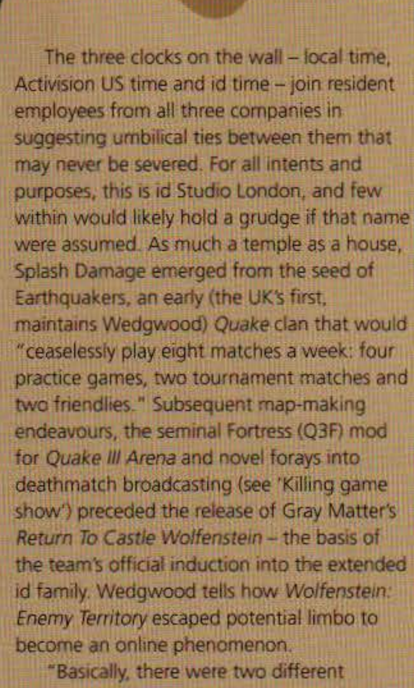
"Everybody is here because they want to make *this* game. Most of us – bar perhaps two employees in the company – have no games industry experience at all." Splash Damage founder and lead designer **Paul Wedgwood** gestures beyond the modest demo room in which an afternoon of coffee and *Quake* has, he admits, given him troublesome acid. "If they weren't doing this, most of them would just go back to their previous professions where they'd probably make more money."



The *Wolfenstein: ET* template may be strongly embedded in *Quake Wars'* design, but the vehicles of GDF and Strogg are unlike anything the genre has provided before. There are nods to both *Battlefield* and *UT2004* in there, but in terms of functionality, the selection's full of fresh ideas

KILLING GAME SHOW

One of the earliest entries on the Splash Damage CV is turning deathmatch into a televised sport for clients such as Activision and BT. "We made something called FPS Studio," reveals Wedgwood, "where instead of recording the game from the player's perspective, you record it on the server and then go back and look at anything you fancy. We put in a lot of spline-path cameras and produced a Windows editor that let you set rules for following the most useful things that were happening." We ask if this technology is likely to feature in some kind of TV channel for online *Quake Wars* spectators. "That has loads of potential," he agrees, "but we haven't started development on any kind of Quake Wars TV just yet – the feature set isn't complete."



The three clocks on the wall – local time, Activision US time and id time – join resident employees from all three companies in suggesting umbilical ties between them that may never be severed. For all intents and purposes, this is id Studio London, and few within would likely hold a grudge if that name were assumed. As much a temple as a house, Splash Damage emerged from the seed of Earthquakers, an early (the UK's first, maintains Wedgwood) *Quake* clan that would "ceaselessly play eight matches a week: four practice games, two tournament matches and two friendlies." Subsequent map-making endeavours, the seminal Fortress (Q3F) mod for *Quake III Arena* and novel forays into deathmatch broadcasting (see 'Killing game show') preceded the release of Gray Matter's *Return To Castle Wolfenstein* – the basis of the team's official induction into the extended id family. Wedgwood tells how *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* escaped potential limbo to become an online phenomenon.

"Basically, there were two different components being developed by two separate companies. One company was developing singleplayer and we were developing the multiplayer. But neither Activision nor id felt it had the potential as a retail product in that guise, so the singleplayer mode was cancelled. Both companies thought it unfair to sell six maps to people as a full-on expansion, but at the same time wrong to throw away something that people would really appreciate. And so, for a period, we were working on a title that we absolutely knew wasn't going to be a retail product.

"But it's done great things for the *Wolfenstein* brand, and it's done a lot for Activision by giving them a loyal base of seven million players that are happy with the game. You don't need a large proportion of those people to purchase *Quake Wars* to cover the cost – we're not a huge team or anything. Activision has always been supportive of us: they don't pressure us and have even supported our crazier ideas, the net effect being that the collaboration continues to be successful. We can't see ourselves ever wanting to work with another publisher, and certainly don't want to be doing two titles at once or having to shop around."

That first *Enemy Territory* had, at its heart, a dedicated model of team-based multiplayer that transcended the casual collaborations of Team Deathmatch, CTF or even the emerging Assault and later Onslaught gametypes. If you wanted to draw the greatest sense of achievement from the free download, you'd do so via cooperation or not at all. Notably, much of this had already been outlined in *RTCW*'s multiplayer design document but never implemented due to time constraints. Has a similar inheritance (from *Quake 4*, perhaps) benefited the team again?

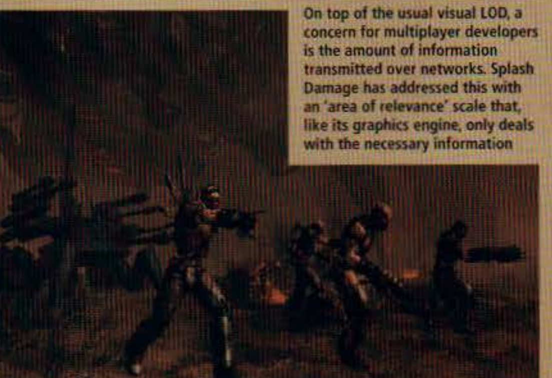
"No, no, no – not at all," Wedgwood insists. "For *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*, Kevin Cloud and Robert Duffy had a list of things that they wanted to achieve but they didn't have time to complete, and we then used that initial list as a basis. Possibly a couple of months before *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* was finished, Kevin and I started firing a high concept backwards and forwards between us for introducing its gameplay into the *Quake* universe. But it was completely independent of the development that Raven was doing for *Quake 4*.

"Externally, it might also look like we're just using the Doom 3 engine to make a new game, but there's actually been about two years of technology development. It's a reasonable assertion to say that it is a brand-new engine now – a standalone with some of the polygon pushing that came with *Doom 3*. In terms of art assets, it's completely original – it doesn't share any textures, models, environments, UI elements or music with either *Doom* or *Quake*."

Wedgwood establishes the new game as '*Quake Zero*', set prior to *Quake II* at the invasive outset of the war against the Strogg. It pitches each of its multiplayer scenarios as a pivotal encounter, an example being the GDF siege of a Strogg water contamination plant that insidiously prepares the local population for Stroggification. Premise aside, however, this is neither *Quake Zero* nor *Quake Next*, but rather what its title suggests – a team-based, objective heavy multiplayer game of Man versus Strogg with a considerable helping of innovation spooned in to excite the mix. For those who found the rigid genre compliance

"IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE WE'RE JUST USING THE DOOM 3 ENGINE, BUT THERE'S ACTUALLY BEEN ABOUT TWO YEARS OF TECH DEVELOPMENT"





On top of the usual visual LOD, a concern for multiplayer developers is the amount of information transmitted over networks. Splash Damage has addressed this with an 'area of relevance' scale that, like its graphics engine, only deals with the necessary information

Below: Splash Damage's Bromley offices are wallpapered with id imagery, from concept art to marketing materials and renders. This is without question a one-game, one-genre, one-collaborator studio and the singularity of purpose bodes well for the latter-stage development of *Quake Wars*. QA is an ongoing process for Wedgwood (pictured) and his team, and with the game now entering alpha there are already multiplayer battles being fought for the purpose of refinement

Right: From concept to virtual reality via Doom 3 normal mapping. The engine has come under fire for its textures in the past, but here the benefits are immediately clear. Having whittled the 3DS Max model (second image) down to the rudimentary in-game version (third image), the team manages to recapture almost all of the original detail through texture maps alone. The superior quality of the results in *Quake Wars* aren't limited to character models, with vehicle cockpits receiving the same treatment









of *Doom 3* and *Quake 4* to be lacking, Splash Damage is about to prove itself the missing link – the bellows to id's technical furnace.

For his part, Wedgwood is one of those rare designers who can survey a genre such as this and see opportunities on the horizon rather than technical and creative fences. As he rifles apace through his plans for *Quake Wars*, he rebuilds your idea of what its genre is capable of one unit, weapon and system at a time. That word, incidentally – genre – is a pet hate, and he seems to hate nothing more than having to use it. This is someone for whom common development vernacular, though efficient, seems frequently awkward, leading him into culs de sac of thought that offend his inventive sensibilities. A paper-scissors-stone approach to balancing team classes, for example, is mentioned reluctantly. It's a design principle wholly appropriate to both *Enemy Territory* titles – one unit type will always have strength over, and weakness before, another – and yet, to him, it's also rudimentary and obvious.





THE GOAL IS THAT A MERE GLANCE WILL REVEAL A UNIT'S RACE, CLASS AND WEAPON AS WELL AS THEIR ENTIRE INVENTORY

Make no mistake, his studio's new game will take that crust of passé design, seen in some quarters to be thickening around id's portfolio, and shatter it. It'll rekindle faith in the company's obsessive relationship with its fans and, potentially, re-establish its proud footing in the universe of PC multiplayer. In every regard, that's how good it looks. It has many tenets – reward is preferable to punishment, nothing can be without purpose, immersion must balance with play – and as a result should have little trouble justifying either the direction it's taking or the devices it has introduced. In celebrating what Wedgwood describes as "the unpredictable nature of humans," it also shares the same innate knowledge of what makes multiplayer as enjoyable as any *Halo* or *Battlefield*, and what's more it's informed by over ten years of compulsive FPS play – a mental map, if you will, of its entire genome.

To be shown an element that the game has adopted from its peers and predecessors is to catch a glint of this creative verve at play. Vehicles, it's been decided, are no longer to be seen as 'avatar swaps' that simply boost your speed or armour. Complex propulsion models mean that while the likes of the GDF's Anansi jet-helicopter and the Strogg Icarus Pack will face off as balanced competitors, each will have an advantage that stems from its unique handling style. Digital stabilisers have been employed to ensure that the piloting of such equipment comes without the usual balancing act, but advanced controls can also be toggled for those who wish to defy less-experienced opponents with barrel rolls and lightning ascents. Importantly, the diversity has been carried from the inside out, each unit boasting a strong visual identity that tallies with the overarching differences between the two sides: the former are multifunctional and tactical, the latter are heavy-set and singularly aggressive.

The decision to implement a minimalist HUD has further necessitated an upturn in the complexity of player animations and detail. The goal is that a mere glance will reveal a unit's race, class and equipped weapon, as well as their entire inventory. The two sides are to be balanced but asymmetrical – the humans militaristic, the Strogg animalistic – units adopting a wide variety of postures to reflect their many traits. A knife-wielding ranger, for instance, will creep with arms

MOTOR FUNCTIONS

The many mechanisms that affect the game's vehicles are a testament to its desire to give every visual touch an underlying significance. The Trojan Amphibious Personnel Carrier can, for example, lose any number of its six wheels and operate accordingly, scraping itself along the ground where the suspension has collapsed. As if it weren't enough that an engineer can then methodically repair each damaged part, a resourceful soldier can alternatively limp the vehicle off the nearest bridge and into water where, thanks to that auxiliary propulsion it sports on its chassis, it'll adopt new and undamaged functionality as a marine vessel.

The Strogg Goliath – a mech quadruped that roams unhindered over hill and dale – offers far greater functionality when occupied by two people. For the lone pilot, the only way to manoeuvre its giant mounted cannon independently of its torso is to crouch its articulated legs, embedding it in the ground

poised to strike, while a Strogg soldier will instead adopt a menacing southpaw strut. The suggestion is even made (and despite the game's pre-alpha state, little seems impossible) that once individual persistent stats are introduced, you might be able to tell from the scars on an approaching player's face whether it's time to start running. When discussing the Strogg in particular, Wedgwood picks *WarCraft III* as an analogy. They, he believes, must be the equivalent of the Night Elves or Orcs rather than the Undead – inhuman yet captivating and charismatic.

If you picture this level of scrutiny extended over *Quake Wars* generally, you get an impression of the scale of its achievement. It's as if every issue that has at one time or another ticked off its staff during the gaming years has been promptly ticked off its to-do list. Wedgwood's father, it's explained, has yet to achieve that magnetic lock on the horizon that stops him losing himself amid the textures of *Half-Life*'s floors and ceilings. *Quake Wars*, then, in its desire to pull both pros and amateurs together in mutual enjoyment, takes idle moments as a cue to gently centre the reticle without disturbing standard aiming. On a more advanced note, the studio wants players sharing a vehicle to enjoy a democratic system of target nomination, devised to avoid those instances of gunners straining for distant targets as their pilot follows a path of their own. On-demand vehicle drops have been introduced to avoid stranding players, though a restriction on the feature's use is still being determined. On and on the list of inventive flourishes continues.

But isn't asking all this – the progressive design, sprawling environments, sharp textures and eclectic ecology – of Doom 3-based technology like using the *GTA* engine for a *Fight Night* game? Or will *Quake Wars* in fact quieten those who, by branding the Doom 3 engine an ill-judged factory of cramped alcoves and samey normal maps, also suggested that the god of modern graphics couldn't tend his own garden? Not so much on the seventh day as at the 11th hour, John Carmack created the megatexture, and all that you see in *Quake Wars* became possible: brute force rendering of environments to the horizon, ground detail that never drops in resolution, an utter lack of repeated tiles and solid performance in spite of it all. A single 32,000x32,000-pixel image



RUMBLE PACKED

The list of available weapons, units and devices in *Quake Wars* reads more like a Warhammer 40,000 codex than a game guide, so enthusiastic is its design and detail. While the Obliterator Bosonic Orb deserves mention for title alone, the Bio-Electric Pinch Bomb demands more. Thrown at the feet of a GDF soldier, it induces an immediate cardiac arrest that can either be left to fatally conclude or interrupted by opportune Stroggification. The resulting zombie can be directed, Stubbs-style, into its own territory, a paralysed complexion being all that stands between detection and deception. Elsewhere, a Strogg MediTek can create a single-use spawn point out of the corpses of fallen foes while deploying Stroyent supplies (combined ammo and health) in the field.



FRONTLINE ASSEMBLY

Key to its sense of team-wide achievement was *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory's* ability to focus large groups of players upon single frontlines and breach points. Each district of a *Quake Wars* map features a point at which both teams must converge to either advance or repel, often centred on a bottleneck such as a bridge or tunnel. Additional dynamic objectives are divided logically among classes, fire teams identifying enemy positions that are then broadcast as optional directives to relevant units. Again echoing its spiritual predecessor, the game imposes no strict limit on player counts, raging street-fights existing as an option for those 64-player enthusiasts.

that's mapped over the entire geometric landscape, the megatexture can be rendered in parts rather than as a whole, reducing its memory footprint to a remarkably small 8Mb of video RAM.

For hobbyist designers, this new engine has a further surprise in store called geometric texture distribution. Put simply, it automates the texturing process for map makers by extrapolating the look of the megatexture at any given point from the nature of the underlying geometry. A sheer aspect will therefore be painted as rock, for example, while flatter terrain will be textured according to factors such as position in relation to sea level and proximity to water. Additional peculiarities can then be added by the designer to heap flesh on those bones. Why, we ask Wedgwood, when *Doom 3* and the more recent *Quake 4* have given the vocal minority such cause for complaint, is *Quake Wars* giving them cause for either silence or celebration? Is it simply a question of design ingenuity and a fresh perspective being enough to blow away that suggested layer of dust?

"I think the game development process is often one of iterative advancement rather than absolute innovation," he suggests. "You can make a game that's about 16th century French feminism where you use musical notes to destroy poetic prose, and that's what many people *think* they want. But when it comes down to it, a game like that isn't necessarily that compelling. Iterative revision and plagiarism with a liberal dose of innovation generally makes people more satisfied than having more of the same, straight sequels or absolute innovation. It's why we don't have triangular football pitches, right? 'Two teams are good, three *must* be better' – that's the decision-making process behind a lot of games that get developed, yet of course it won't make a good game. But improving the rules every year and making something more competitive makes the audience grow.

"As a set of game developers, we collaborate endlessly with id on the design. Maybe the reason why *Quake Wars* is doing well is because they have so much experience with technology and with the decision-making processes – directing art and directing design – while we have that crazy inexperience where we'll try new things, sometimes without even telling them. When we started discussing an outdoor multiplayer game with vehicle physics, they said: 'OK, here's what we'll need'. So they're a smart bunch of guys. There really isn't anyone, as far as I'm concerned, who's as clever as John Carmack at graphics programming. And they have some of the best AI and physics programmers, and all-round programmers like Robert Duffy. There are very few people in the industry who match them at all."

"ID HAS SOME OF THE BEST AI, PHYSICS AND ALL-ROUND PROGRAMMERS. THERE ARE FEW PEOPLE WHO MATCH THEM AT ALL"

The presentation is so quick and Wedgwood's delivery so intense that you almost come to share his disdain for obvious remarks and generic questions. Those we have, then, we dispense with quickly. The target specs for *Quake Wars* are expected to be the same as those of *Quake 4*, though this is expressed as: 'a PC that can run *Quake 4* can run this' – often wording that suggests optimum performance and appearance to be reliant upon something better. As for a potential 360 version, there's no development planned (at least by Splash Damage) or underway. Only a fool, of course, would take that as meaning that it won't happen, and Wedgwood acknowledges that 360 would handle the new engine extremely well. The prospect of a Live-enabled version that looks like the screens you see here speaks for itself.

Right now, however, the 24-strong team's eyes are fixed on this game and its one format. The familiar id philosophy (one that Activision, to give it credit, in this case seems to share) of sitting back and letting the creative process run its course is evident in



Exteriors segue into interiors naturally thanks to all-pervading ambient light and delicately merged architectures, while the game's night-day cycle conjures dramatic shifts in contrast, even upon the innermost walls of tunnels and the descents into enclosed trenches



This sequence reveals the detail being worked into cockpit interiors via intricate textures and normal mapping. Such graphical quality should be achievable on the inevitable Xbox 360 version







The Strogg plasma mortar is their most devastating deployable, introducing a *Command & Conquer* level of firepower to a genre that characteristically shies from it. The plasma can be seen by almost everyone as it arcs into the sky, its whining fall scattering idle soldiers

the many provisos of 'we might ditch this', 'we're still discussing that', and 'just remember that won't look shit when it's done'. Little, we have to admit, looks like that even now. The nature of sandbox multiplayer development, Wedgwood reveals, means that there's less emphasis placed on milestone builds and concrete feature sets. But what of other potential distractions? Will there be bots? A singleplayer component, even? "No" is the immediate answer.

"I think the likes of *Battlefield* have proved that it's OK to be a completely independent multiplayer game, even though *Quake Wars* initially appears to be something of a niche title. A lot of people still have trouble thinking of a multiplayer game that isn't an add-on or an expansion component, but that's changed a lot recently."

Not in the case of *Battlefield: Modern Combat*, we propose.

"Well, developers will always be tempted to add multiplayer to singleplayer, or vice versa, because they're worried about back-of-box features. But if you trust the audience to make the decision, the time you can spend improving things without chasing that perceived must-have feature nets you a much better game."

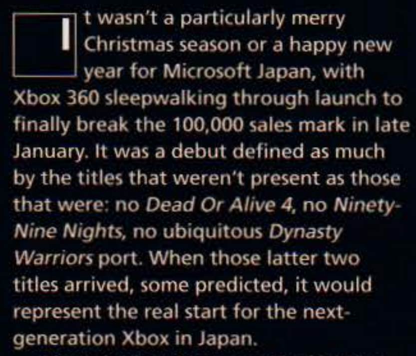
And a two-year lifespan – the apparent average for a successful multiplayer PC title – can't do much harm.

"Not at all," it's agreed. "You can work for three years on a singleplayer game and at the end get three weeks of sales, some internet buzz and then it disappears and you start another project. With *Enemy Territory*, that game's been out two-and-a half years, in which time we've had eight million hits to the website and 140,000 fan messages on our forums. You can't sustain that momentum with any singleplayer game. Things like QuakeCon have, for us, been amazing transformations: we now get people wanting us to sign their chests and T-shirts. It's insane – the fans and far more loyal and intense."

Intensity, it's clear, is what makes both *Quake Wars* and its developer unusually exciting. As early glimpses go, this has been a bombardment. Not of buzzwords and promises, however, but of ideas, toyed with onscreen in differing stages of realisation. Our only fear is that while it dizzies the mind and fills the notepad now, some unforeseen hammer blow in the remaining production stages will somehow reduce the game before launch. But even a half-baked realisation of *Quake Wars'* vision would still be some feat.


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It wasn't a particularly merry Christmas season or a happy new year for Microsoft Japan, with Xbox 360 sleepwalking through launch to finally break the 100,000 sales mark in late January. It was a debut defined as much by the titles that weren't present as those that were: no *Dead Or Alive 4*, no *Ninety-Nine Nights*, no ubiquitous *Dynasty Warriors* port. When those latter two titles arrived, some predicted, it would represent the real start for the next-generation Xbox in Japan.

Though Xbox 360's steadily declining numbers did indeed spike for *DOA4*'s release, the game itself managed little more than a third of *DOA3*'s excess of 120,000 launch sales (at the time as close to the mythical one-for-one hardware/software tie ratio as a marketing department could possibly ask for). It seems the *DOA* wave has almost been ridden out for the system, at least in its home territory – although the canny preproduction announcement of *DOA Xtreme 2* has sat unchallenged atop Famitsu 360 readers' most wanted charts.

Dynasty Warriors 5 Special suffered a far more ignoble end, failing to break even 5,000 sales on release and promptly disappearing from the charts. Such disinterest could bode gloomily for the repeatedly delayed *Ninety-Nine Nights* – or alternately, that disinterest could be because of *N3*'s regular six-page screenshot spreads. *DW5 Special*'s bump in texture quality and resolution is hardly comparable to next-gen-native titles, a realisation growing among Japanese media and consumers alike. During a January press presentation of *Kameo* at Roppongi Hills' Virgin Toho cinema, attendees were taken aback at how the fidelity of the visuals survived the transfer to a movie screen – far beyond the quality of PS2 titles previously showcased here. That leap is also beginning to register at storefronts, where 360 demo-pod visuals (at least where the HD setups have been correctly calibrated) obviously outstrip those of the workhorse PS2s.

Coupled with mounting rumours from within the industry that Sony's PlayStation 3 launch could be much later, and with far fewer games, than the manufacturer had suggested, Xbox 360 could yet reverse its fortunes if it has the games – and, sales seem to suggest, if it has the *new* games – to show for it. As a Microsoft Japan spokesman at the *Kameo* event remarked, Xbox 360's real concern is far less its disappointing launch than what its state will be a year on.

Over the next six pages we look at some of the supporters of Xbox 360's difficult second wind. From killer apps to niche affairs, and from industry giants to tiny boutique studios, each has their own ideas of how to find Japanese success on an American console.

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When Microsoft asked the Japanese videogame industry to 'Jump In', which developers took the plunge?

Mistwalker



The runaway success of **Hironobu Sakaguchi**'s *Final Fantasy* turned Square into a powerhouse developer; the catastrophic failure of his Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within CG film nearly crushed it again. All eyes are now on his Mistwalker RPG label's ability to repeat his golden touch and steer clear of that latter-day curse. Mistwalker consists of a small directorial staff, working in concert with freelancers (often Square alumni, such as composer Nobuo Uematsu), and contracting development to outside studios. Though a common Japanese industry practice, the weight of multitasking in Mistwalker's case has kept Sakaguchi secluded – not unwillingly – in Hawaii.

PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER/ARTOON**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Blue Dragon



Up to five characters can join typically excitable player character Shu's party, each lending their shadow to battles as well as their personality to exploration. As you might expect, Sakaguchi indicates that certain plot points will find characters unable to call upon their mystical backup

Despite his best efforts not to play favourites with his titles, when we met Sakaguchi at a pre-TGS *Blue Dragon* showing in '05 he couldn't resist showing the first prototype of a figure based on the licence. It's obvious that he sees the game as just the beginning of a thriving intellectual property, a sentiment his Microsoft sponsors will doubtless share if *Blue Dragon* becomes the breakout success it's being groomed for.

It's certainly one of the most visually striking titles yet shown for 360 – upstaging *Dragon Quest VIII*'s recent treatment of Akira Toriyama's character designs with an outline-free, softly luminous reproduction. Both characters and environments benefit from filter effects intended to avoid the plasticised look of current shader-heavy titles, and all animation is to be procedurally generated for a more flowing, naturalistic result.

The game design, however, appears a little more machined: the world is divided into themed areas inevitably including deserts, mountain peaks and lava floes, all scattered with the requisite remains of an ancient, highly advanced civilisation. Battles will take place in a separate field to exploration, and a linear quest structure seems likely. "I really hate games in which you need to walk back to a place again at night to find one specific quest or event," Sakaguchi confides, "so the game is straightforward – you won't need to redo areas in a different condition."

Characters, and more importantly their shadow familiars which spring forth to do battle on their behalf, are also bound to specific classes – but it's suggested that customisation will be possible. Shadows learn techniques during battle which can be later be shared, such as a martial artist's shadow donating its punch attack to a wizard's, giving the latter melee ability in addition to spellcasting.

Whether this raises concerns about developing a super-shadow rather than utilising the entire party is a moot point given that no system details have yet been released and footage seen so far has been demonstrably in-engine, but not in-game. Other than the jump in visual fidelity – and it's such a jump that it seems unfair to preface it with an 'only' – there's also little indication of any 360-specific functionality, although 'limited' Live features are under consideration. Until a playable build surfaces, the longest shadow over *Blue Dragon* may well be that of *Blinx*, Artoon's last attempt at a console-defining title.



The developers are patently – and quite understandably – in love with their characters' motion. As simple an action as changing direction while running turns first the eyes, then the head, and then the body in an exaggerated catch-up



PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER/FEEL+**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Lost Odyssey

If *Blue Dragon* is the game that would be *Dragon Quest*, then *Lost Odyssey*'s ornate machinery, swirling colours and brooding lead character position it as Sakaguchi's *Final Fantasy*-in-exile. The storyline, of an immortal warrior's reflections on the changing world around him, has been supplied by a novelist; character design is the videogame debut of manga artist Takehiko Inoue; and the engine comes courtesy of Epic – this will be the second Japanese Unreal Engine 3-powered title.

Sakaguchi will assume his customary producer role, while recently formed studio Feel+ handles development. Apparently the rebirth of *Beat Down* developer Scarab, it has been swollen by arrivals from Square – rumoured to include major talent from the *FFXII* team, though they may not be directly involved with *Odyssey*.

For a game with the sentimental bombast so beloved of the old-school Square crowd, exposure has been surprisingly limited, perhaps in order for *Blue Dragon*'s trickle of information to shine. So little is known that the Japanese media is reduced to reprinting movie stills and breathless speculation: something uncertain years of waiting for *FFXII* has already accustomed them to doing. Should *Odyssey* release in better time with scale intact, it truly will be a next-generation difference.





The structure of *Odyssey*'s tale, with lead Kaim as an almost omniscient observer on the effects of natural time and magical revolution, likely means progression through the game will be predefined. However, a high degree of character customisation has been promised with regard to abilities, suggesting he may be a man of many classes

PUBLISHER: **AQ INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER/CAVIA**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Cry On



Though the golems of *Cry On* are supposedly empty automatons, Bogul can feel and speak – all the better for an emotional wringing

Mistwalker's most recently announced project is Sakaguchi's first action-RPG, but it will be collaborating studio Cavia's third, following its *Drakengard* titles – the games share a character designer and medieval Europe-inspired setting.

Sakaguchi's role is as scenario writer and supervisor, but he also intends to contribute a control system that will more meaningfully use the analogue sticks for interaction. Despite the genre label, such interaction won't exclusively involve striking down hordes of monsters, as protagonist Sally is the brains of the game: the brawn comes in the initially diminutive form of Bogul, a golem carried on Sally's back. The collection of certain materials allows Bogul to grow to gigantic proportions and make short work of obstacles, as Sakaguchi explains: "Where Sally needs 15 minutes to solve the puzzle, Bogul would require a minute."

Barely beyond the concept stage, it's some consolation that *Cry On*'s developers are no strangers to crushing pathos (the title is a hint to the scenario's theme), lurching scale and odd couples – as those who experienced *Drakengard*'s nightmarish endings will attest. Sakaguchi's guidance and a ¥1 billion (£4.8m) budget, meanwhile, should ensure the game doesn't inherit the less flattering aspects of Cavia's back catalogue.

Capcom & Namco

Capcom's early commitment, splatter beat 'em up *Dead Rising*, was met with less enthusiasm than frontman Keiji Inafune has expressed for Xbox 360. But followed by *Resident Evil 5*'s multiplatform announcement and solid-looking exclusive *Lost Planet*, it seems less likely for the company to repeat its last-generation snub – not least because of the development costs of playing favourites. Conversely, although Namco announced more titles and was the only major Japanese presence at launch, its post-*Ridge* titles – *We Love Football* and *Frame City* – look shakier. A recently released placeholder PS3 line-up points toward it playing partisan with bankable licences.

PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
RELEASE: TBA

Lost Planet: Extreme Condition



Fittingly, Microsoft's upmarket 360 Lounge cafe in Aoyama – noted by some to enjoy more success with Japanese public than the actual console – hosted a December 10 event better received than the launch itself. Keiji Inafune was on hand to introduce his *Lost Planet*, a reassuringly expensive, reassuringly next-generation, reassuringly 360-exclusive title.

Not just talking the project up as a company spokesman, Inafune saw parallels to his own *Onimusha* series in the production. As unlikely as it now seems, medieval Japanese stories were not a particularly fashionable topic for games until popularised by the original *Onimusha*. Now, science fiction (outside of established manga and animation settings) has fallen out of favour, and Inafune hopes to renew interest, and find similar franchise success, in the theme.

As with the later *Onimusha* games, *Lost Planet* draws on a guest star's voice and likeness – this time South Korean actor Lee Byung-Hun. While Byung-Hun cuts a suitable videogame profile, complete with regulation Capcom fringe, the casting has raised eyebrows. He has little recognition in the west, and his popularity in Japan is chiefly among a mature female audience unlikely to Jump In, even at his behest.

Even so, the game's two-fisted action – with the hero wielding a different weapon in each, even when strapped into a Vital Suit combat exoskeleton – has an irresistible confidence. If the Japanese 360 continues to receive a steady flow of western titles, *Lost Planet* will need to maintain that confidence to distinguish itself, since the aversion to sci-fi shooters is seemingly unique to Inafune's side of the Pacific.

Lost Planet's trump card could be Live play, a not-so-strange notion for Capcom following *Monster Hunter*'s success. Inafune confirmed that cooperative and deathmatch multiplayer will accompany the cinematic singleplayer.





Danger comes from both insectoid and human sources, as well as the Extreme Condition of the arctic surface itself. Outside of a Vital Suit, the player risks freezing to death – if he isn't incinerated first





PUBLISHER: NAMCO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
RELEASE: SPRING

Frame City

Originally set to accompany *Ridge Racer 6* at launch, Namco's freeform urban hitman title has suffered two delays, first into 2006 and more recently to mid-year. The first Japanese adopter of Unreal Engine 3, *Frame City's* obvious struggle with the technology has made it notorious for wildly fluctuating visual detail: a deathly TGS 2005 reception reassured few.

If nothing else, *FC* is aggressively Live-aware, as Namco intends to update the game weekly with new stages and missions. A leaderboard will be maintained for time and score attack modes such as the bluntly named Criminal Killer, and any overachievers on a user's friends list are classed as 'rivals' – providing a bonus if outscored. Scores can be redeemed for coins to purchase in-game capsule toys, an unintentional irony given the characters' die-cast appearance.

As to whether there *is* anything else, it seems almost inevitable that the game will repeat the unworkable tangle of *Breakdown*, only without the saving grace of that title's fundamentally good intentions. Dropping *Hitman*'s method into *GTA*'s living world always seemed more mutually damaging collision course than slick high concept, and the blank aesthetics haven't aided *FC*'s flagging public profile in Japan.

FC's unearthly sheen of glossy shaders and garish textures almost bludgeons out some kind of style – but as of its TGS showing, it's less appealing in motion, coming across as irredeemably clumsy









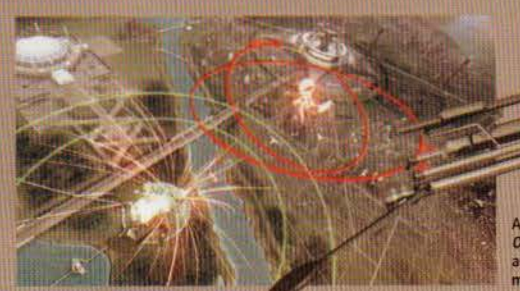
Senko No Ronde Rev.X



The already attractive mechs have been rebuilt, and their pilots provided with extra costumes

PUBLISHER: G.REV
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
RELEASE: SPRING

Seeing its potential for Live play, Microsoft approached micro-developer G.rev – not so much shooter house as shooter living room – to port its innovative one-on-one arcade shooter. While G.rev was more interested in producing a 360 version of its latest title, the more traditional scrolling shooter *Under Defeat* (since announced for Dreamcast), it agreed – ultimately rewriting much of *Senko No Ronde* from scratch. Widescreen reformatting and the benefit of a previous arcade balance revision should make *Rev.X* the definitive version of the title: in turn creating a small but fanatical Live following of virtual arcade duellists.



A hybrid of wall-of-bullets shooter and *Virtual On*-style close combat, *Senko* swaps play styles as the duellists approach or draw apart. Pitched matches segue between the two several times

AQ Interactive

On October 1 2005, independent developers Artoon, Cavia and Feel+ merged under a single publishing banner, Artistic Quality Interactive. Chaired by Cavia founder and one-time Sega executive Hayao Nakayama, the supergroup's 350+ staff – many ex-Namco, Sega or Square – will produce for all next-gen and handheld platforms.

Nakayama's desire to provide a movie-industry model of funding for original game development wasn't best demonstrated by launch title *Tetris: The Grand Master Ace*, but AQ has grander plans. Each developer is involved with a Mistwalker project, and AQ will publish two in-house Xbox 360 action titles before the year's end.

PUBLISHER: **AQ INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **ARTOON**
RELEASE: **WINTER**

Vampire's Rain

Artoon founder Naoto Oshima has a point to prove: that there's more to his company than stylised, cartoon visuals. To that end, *Vampire's Rain* is a shader-heavy title in pursuit of photorealism, intended to demonstrate that Japanese developers can produce technology-led visuals on a par with their western counterparts – an arm-wrestling match that may prove ill advised.

Set on the outskirts of Los Angeles, the game follows a team of almost litigiously *Splinter Cell*-inspired military operatives charged with containing an outbreak of vampirism. Oshima feels that vampires have been unfairly rehabilitated by recent pop culture, and so *Rain*'s creatures are a return to their roots as a superhuman, feral embodiment of evil. The commandos' task is first to determine which of their potential targets are undead – ideally without triggering their mark's bestial transformation – and then to take up cover, or even clamber up fire escapes and snipe from rooftops, in order to gain the upper hand. The hunt is further complicated by realtime weather effects, LA's rare rainstorms providing a more violent claustrophobia than *Silent Hill*'s iconic fog. Creating a credible rain effect was said to be the team's first research-and-development task, indicating its importance to mood and gameplay.

Rain will support cooperative and free-for-all play over Live, with team-based matches allowing players to choose vampire or counter-vampire roles. There's obvious potential in either mode – but much will hinge on whether Artoon appreciates that it's not just per-pixel lighting that has made the squad-based thirdperson shooter more readily associated with the west. Unlike the majority of AQ's 360 development, *Rain* has been openly promoted as a multiplatform title, though without specifics of the PS3 version or how far it will trail behind the 360 version's winter release.





Like its visual approach, the setting is designed with western appeal in mind, should the Japanese market prove less receptive. We can't help but feel that images of paramilitaries sniping passers-by in suburban LA may have a less complimentary reception than Oshima hopes for





Vampires are unmistakable once transformed (left), but the team's intention is to play upon the uncertainty beforehand. Presumably this will be acheived with more ambient streetlife, as in the version shown anyone walking the streets is fair game



PUBLISHER: AQ INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: CAVIA
RELEASE: SPRING

Bullet Witch

Two factors have inspired the development of *Bullet Witch*: the first, and more obvious, being the renaissance of Gothic fashion in Japanese animation (though Tokyo's 'Gothic Lolita' culture would be affronted at the suggestion it ever left). The second is Nintendo's DS, as the development team has taken its runaway success as a signal that modern games truly are too complicated to enjoy.

In response to this epiphany, the group's thirdperson shooter – in which a gun-toting witch, Alicia, battles demons across an alternate America in 2013 – will require the use of only one stick and two buttons to play. If it seems like a slightly misguided reading of the DS's audience appeal, or more critically what will appeal to Xbox 360's audience, it's at least a respite from previous Cavia action title *Ghost In The Shell: Stand Alone Complex* – which required use of every DualShock control input. Ideally, *Bullet Witch* will also provide punchier firefights than that title's loose sense of contact.

However, Alicia can wield magical destruction in situations where enemies are too numerous or entrenched for conventional warfare, and further powers and weapons are purchased between stages. While upgrades will keep her ahead of the difficulty curve, certain side-sections are designed to be unassailable on first playthrough, requiring a return engagement with a heavier arsenal. Live functionality will be limited to content downloads, possibly including extra stages as well as new damage-dealing lightshows.

If it all sounds a little last generation, there's certainly room in Xbox 360's early lineup for a straightforward arcade gunslinger – especially in the noticeable absence of a From action title (these appear to have been committed to PS3). The question, then, is whether *Bullet Witch*'s simplicity is slick and snappy enough to compete with an equivalent spend on Live Arcade titles.



The most convincing demonstration of *Bullet Witch*'s next-gen credentials is in Alicia's magic strikes, specifically a tempest that wrenches nearby level features into the air (far left)

Spectral Force 3: Innocent Rage



The 2D artwork is eye-searingly sharp in HD, but it's consigned to talking heads during cutscenes

PUBLISHER: IDEA FACTORY
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE/XPEC
RELEASE: APRIL

Unknown in the west (though supposed competitor Nippon Ichi has investigated localising the titles), Idea Factory's *Spectral Force* strategy-RPG series has a strong local following. Since its PlayStation inception, the titles have mixed SRPG traditions with action elements: in *SF3*, the latter is a Rage meter, which the party shares to power abilities.

Controls have been overhauled for one-button-action simplicity in the hopes of broader appeal across a smaller audience – a safer bet may have been to play up intricacy for genre fans, but it still marks a previously absent genre's presence in an Xbox line-up.





Spectral Force 3's chief use of 360 visuals is to stack the interface more comfortably in the aspect ratio, a decision that has affronted some fans of the SRPG series


GAUNTLET
ATARI
JOUST
Williams
ROBOTRON:
2084
Williams

360

Is Xbox Live Arcade the most important next-gen console platform of all?

Two recurring scare stories have become commonplace in gaming over the years. The first is that the arcade is dead. The second is that independent game development has no future. The reality behind these beliefs depends a fair amount on where you are in the world and how you define 'independent', but there's enough weight to both to make them widely accepted truisms. So perhaps a better question than 'Is it true?' is 'Does it matter?' Large-scale, publisher-controlled games are better than ever, and what need is there for arcades when gaming is now accessible through your phone, your browser and your PSP?

It was into this climate that Microsoft launched Live Arcade, a service offering low-cost, quick-fix gaming, and a haven for retro titles and small-scale developers. A limited service with a small game selection and cumbersome implementation, it seemed a nonsensical line for the company to be following: foisting old and odd games on to an exceptionally hardcore userbase. But with 360, the service is reborn: varied, accessible and slick. This is Microsoft saying: 'Arcades mattered, indies matter, and we can save them'. So who's right?

For **Greg Canessa**, the creator of the Live Arcade concept and current group manager of the service, the proof of the pudding is in the playing: he's openly stunned at how successful the take-up has been: "It's done phenomenally well – it's exceeded our expectations. The numbers for Arcade blew us away in North America and we were hoping we could sustain that when we launched in Europe, and they did that – plus some. European gamers evidently are fanatical about Arcade, as are US gamers. So we're jumping up and down over here." How that translates to hard numbers is something Microsoft isn't willing to reveal right now, but Canessa confirms 'many





Block-rocking treats



Although Live Arcade games are externally developed, the internal Microsoft team oversees their implementation into the service, ensuring overall quality control and common standards. This is most apparent in well-considered save systems and the thoughtful inclusion of optional icon overlays in block puzzle games to assist colourblind – or bleary eyed – players.





hundreds of thousands of players', which, with only 1.5 million 360s sold by the end of January worldwide, is a substantial penetration rate. But is this a question of new users simply checking out a feature of their new console, or of a real new trend?

"Every Xbox Live user is downloading and trying four-and-a-half Arcade games on average right now, which is fantastic allowing that at the moment we only have 14 titles available for sale and we only had nine at launch. So some people are downloading nine, ten, 11, 12 games." And are they playing for five minutes and then moving back to full retail games? "We're still mining that

"Every Xbox Live user is downloading and trying four-and-a-half Arcade games on average right now, which is fantastic allowing that we only have 14 titles"



information – but we know that it's hours per game per month. It's significant. With titles like *Bejeweled 2* and *Hexic* you see really, really long play sessions. But even if you look at *Geometry Wars* – the average game length there is really only about five to seven minutes, but people are playing for hours because they're playing multiple games in one session."

Nor is it just a case of users taking advantage of free content: Live Arcade's conversion rate – the proportion of people who upgrade the demo to the full, paid-for version – is extraordinarily high, according to Canessa: "The industry average on PC is about 0.8 per cent to one per cent, and in the first generation of Arcade we were hitting about 8.5 per cent, which was fantastic. But in this generation of Arcade we're hitting up to 35 per cent, and averaging over 20 per cent across all the titles. I mean, we had to check the data to make sure it wasn't a mistake. It's absolutely unheard of."

And it's that average which is so remarkable: despite the inevitably hardcore tastes of many early adopters, the popularity of Live Arcade titles is spread across its three main game types: "There are the coin-op classics – which we've improved, we've tightened up the graphics and added Live; there are the remakes of classic play patterns – new games by design, but which utilise the classic mechanics; and then there's the puzzle and parlour games. But what's so encouraging about our numbers is that we have broad support across all three types." The recently announced top five includes *Smash TV* and *Gauntlet*, *Bejeweled* and *Zuma*, and *Geometry Wars*.

It's at this point that Microsoft's claims begin to ring true. The size of the audience for this type of gaming, and their enthusiasm for the games on offer, is already becoming clear. Indeed, judging by the data viewable through players' Gamercards, the most enthusiastic *Bejeweled* player has clocked up an average over two-and-a-half hours' play, every day, since 360 launched. The irony, of course, is that these games – *Hexic, Joust, Mutant Storm* and the rest – have been easily accessible via PCs for years without attracting this kind of













Games like *Gauntlet* and *Smash TV* have been accessible at home for many years, but where Live Arcade rejuvenates them – and makes the 400-point (£3.40) entry fee worthwhile – is in the smooth implementation of local and online multiplayer







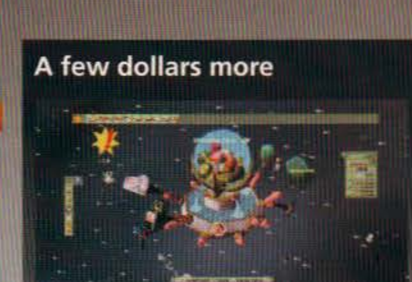
Live Arcade has made the twin-stick shooter its own, whether it's with new delights like the top-selling *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* or *Mutant Storm Reloaded* (right). Sequels to both are eagerly awaited, although so far only *Mutant Storm*'s is confirmed, and currently under development at PomPom

dedication – or investment – from a hardcore audience. The difference now is that these games are filtered out of the thousands of titles clogging the emulation and browser-gaming scenes, honed to suit console play, and delivered direct to your sofa via a system which already knows your credit card details. The big question is if Live Arcade can sustain (and indeed improve) its penetration and conversion rates once the userbase begins to diversify, but since the service was conceived from the outset to appeal to more casual players, it should be well-placed to do so. Canessa is confident it's already happening: "I think we're already beginning to see the girlfriend/boyfriend phenomenon when you have these secondary gamers in the house who are setting up accounts and looking for something to do and looking to set their own high scores. It's already started." There's a twist, though: since purchased games are (mostly) only available as demos to those logged in on secondary accounts, Microsoft is pioneering a policy where every user needs to buy the game afresh – if you want to log your scores, you'll need to pay the price.

So if Microsoft has already proved that there is a ready market for this kind of gaming experience, and that it can appeal – as arcades of old did – to both veteran, dedicated gamers, and curious, inexperienced newcomers, does Live Arcade really represent a safe haven for independent developers? Feedback from current teams is universally enthusiastic. "Live Arcade is pretty much the natural home for the likes of Llamasoft," declares **Jeff Minter**, maker of Xbox 360's music visualiser Neon and now at work on an unannounced Live Arcade project, who cites the quality of the online infrastructure, the comfortable development environment of 360 and the flexibility of the financial model as the main advantages of the platform. **Patrick Buckland**, CEO of Stainless Games (developer of *Crystal Quest* and the upcoming *Novadrome*), is even more emphatic: "I firmly believe this is the way forward. I'm convinced that in ten years' time – or less – we'll look back at the concept of walking into Game in the high street to buy a physical game and laugh at how quaint it all was. Live Arcade is the forefront of the new way, and Stainless is proud to be there right at the start."

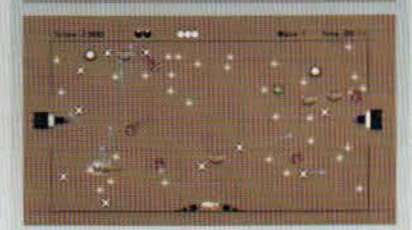
The reason for this passion is twofold. The first key issue is finance. Live Arcade offers a radically different model from mainstream publishing, providing substantial royalties on finished games rather than funding (and in many cases controlling) ongoing development. "It's a very low development cost," explains Canessa. "We've seen some of the games be developed for as little as $100,000, ranging up to a few hundred thousands. So we're not talking about a lot of money." But if you're two guys working from home, as in the case of PomPom, then surely $100,000 *is* quite a lot of money? Canessa laughs: "Sure! So there have been instances where Microsoft has helped out, if there's a game we really, really love and the guys just have no money. But the case is that more often than not – especially now that we've

A few dollars more





The 360's Marketplace system makes it easy for developers to provide additional content for around 100 points (85p) a time. *Outpost Kaloki X* offers new scenarios and sandbox modes (top) and *Crystal Quest*, due for release soon, is likely to offer skins like the X-ray-inspired Nano (above) and self-explanatory Sketch (below), as well as new sound effects and extra difficulty levels.









From left to right: Greg Canessa, founder and general manager of the Live Arcade service; Jeff Minter of Llamasoft, maker of Neon; Patrick Buckland, CEO of Stainless Games; and John Cook, Michael Michael and Miles Visman, who make up PomPom



The one-more-go arcade compulsion remains, but the visual gulf between *Robotron: 2084* and the very handsomely retooled *Marble Blast Ultra* is clear. What's not so obvious is the new generosity of spirit: infinite lives and optional level skips make many new Live Arcade games forgiving and welcoming experiences, while smart balancing preserves the sense of challenge

"You sell the core product at a very reasonable price and then charge for other bits and pieces. So the customer isn't risking too much in the first place"





It's easy to look at a few Live Arcade screenshots, like these of *Hexic* (top) and *Bejeweled 2* (above) and dismiss the service as being dominated with dumb block-game clones, but so far the titles chosen all offer genuinely distinct and involving gameplay: the only common thread is how addictive they become. It's crucial that the editorial standards don't slacken over the coming months

launched and it's been successful – we have guys coming out of the woodwork, venture capitalists who are willing to fund small developers in order to get games on Arcade, so the model is more of a self-funded model. I mean, people are borrowing money from their parents and they're able to make games for us."

There's usually a 'but' at this stage, a moment when a claim of 'substantial royalties' transpires to be something rather more meagre, but in Microsoft's case it stands up to scrutiny – and gets better and better with time, according to Canessa: "Our revenue share model is based on the number of units sold. It's not a typical advance model, so we share directly with the developer, and it's very aggressive, by which I mean in all cases the developer keeps the majority of the revenue. I can't quote the specifics, but the developer keeps the majority of the revenue – more than that, in fact. And, as the installed base grows and you can project down the line to the 50 million units, 70 million units that Robbie [Bach] and Peter [Moore] have been talking about, so this could be a very, very large business for folks, based on that pick-up rate. It could be very, very lucrative." Buckland confirms his description: "I think the financial model of Live Arcade is exceedingly good. To my mind it points the way forward – I think Microsoft has come up with a very fair model, where the developer receives the majority of the income from each sale if they funded the project themselves, and thus took all the risk."

And when all these numbers come together, you can see why Live Arcade represents such a lifeline for small, independent teams. When *Marble Blast Ultra* went on sale, it was clear from the high-score tables that in less than a week well over 20,000 copies had been sold. Which, at 800 points (or £6.80) and with at least half the revenue going back to the developer, is over £68,000. And, as Buckland points out, that's only the beginning: "Like all online sales, Live Arcade sales are more steady and longer lasting than traditional retail sales. Rather than having a tiny window within which to rack up the majority of one's sales, you have a year or more of good, steady income." And if this alone weren't convincing, then Marketplace offers the ability to sell additional content for a pound or two at a time, to prolong the profitability of the game. *Outpost Kaloki X* sells additional scenarios and *Crystal Quest* will offer new content (see 'A few dollars more'). Buckland thinks it's the way forward: "Rather than expecting customers to pay £40 for a game, you modularise the experience. You then sell them the core product at a very reasonable price, and then charge them for other bits and pieces as and when they need or want them. That way, the customer isn't risking too much in the first place, and isn't playing for anything that they don't need." And, by keeping





costs down on the core game, you greatly increase the number of gamers likely to upgrade to the full version.

But while the numbers are great, the freedom is also something that is greatly valued by indie developers. **John Cook**, agent for *Mutant Storm* creator PomPom, explains the team's take on the service: "There's a lot of potential in Live Arcade for smaller developers to do 'small but perfectly formed' games for a genuinely next-gen platform – things that could never get into the shops because of the way that business works for console games. It's still early days, but hopefully Live Arcade will keep the mix of the weird and the wonderful." Minter agrees: "It has an excellent chance of enabling the kind of small-project, playful and fun developments which the existing distribution model simply no longer allows and which were therefore dying out."

It's clear, then, that Live Arcade has long-term viability as a home for the better browser puzzlers, the more iconic retro classics, and the retro-inspired likes of *Geometry Wars* and *Mutant Storm*. But to really make a mark as a platform in its own right, Live Arcade's portfolio needs to substantially expand. Is there scope for that? Canessa outlines an aggressively expansionist policy: 35 titles by summer (possibly more, since the team is working to speed up delivery to keep pace with the 'rabid' appetites of Live Arcade players), and at least three or four more a month thereafter. And they could be larger – currently limited in size to fit on a Memory Unit to cater for the minority of 360 owners without a hard drive, Canessa is happy to confirm that larger games would be considered if the content necessitated it. Or perhaps they could be more mature – although most Live Arcade games are currently suitable for all ages, the intention is for the portfolio to reflect as wide a range of content as the full retail games. In the next few months, control via the remote, rather than the controller, will be enabled for suitable games, opening up the possibility of family-oriented quiz games, with paid-for, downloadable question packs. Then comes the 360 camera, still in development, but already planned for use in Live Arcade both as a communications tool and as a game control device, much like Sony's EyeToy. The only thing that doesn't look set to change is the price point: although some exceptional games will be released at a higher price, Canessa is adamant that 400 and 800 points (£3.40/£6.80) will remain the standard.

So, with an omnivorous remit, an enthusiastic captive audience, a range of input devices and a gilt-edged revenue model, it's little wonder that the appeal of Live Arcade is going beyond the indies. In the first instance that meant companies like Midway and Capcom looking to leverage their retro IP, but now that pattern is changing. "Large publishers are coming back and where before they wanted to do one or two titles, now they want to do 20 titles. They're coming to us and saying: 'We want to start up a division that's dedicated to Arcade game development', literally that kind of conversation. They're willing to throw permanent resources and permanent development teams at new Arcade development," says Canessa.

This potential for new games is huge – and is crucial if Live Arcade is to ensure it doesn't begin to feel stale as it mines content that's been available on PCs for years. Ultimately, it could grow to encompass joint projects where one game extends across an involving, immersive full retail experience and the short, sharp thrills of an integrated Live Arcade title, with progress in one interconnecting with the other. In the short term, Canessa sees the potential more in terms of IP extension: "Sometimes it's three, four, five years before you see the next instalment of a big game, and it would make perfect sense in the middle of that cycle for a big publisher like EA or Ubisoft to drop in an Arcade game featuring the character from that game. I think that's very likely."

This is potentially an enormous shift – major publishers dedicating revenue to new Arcade products, returning to a kind of gaming, and a kind of game development, which has long been marked for extinction. Is it the lure of a 50 per cent revenue return, or is there pressure from within the development community which wants to return to the good old days of smaller teams, shorter cycles and more innovative ideas?





Until more new developers are signed, and more major publishers announce original projects, it's inevitable that Live Arcade will be dominated by ports – albeit sensitively handled – of titles that made their name on PC, like the *Puzzloop*-'inspired' *Zuma* (top) and *Outpost Kaloki X*, which applies the principles of *Lemonade Tycoon* to a spaceport. It's a clear endorsement of Live Arcade's ease of use that gamers who would never have touched these sorts of games on PC have been pursuaded by their appearance on 360



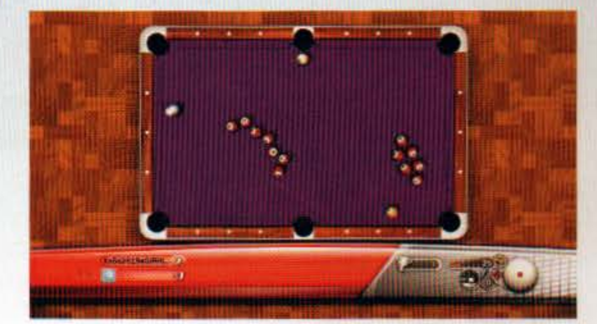
Games like *Hardwood Hearts* and *Hardwood Spades* are the least charismatic of Live Arcade's offerings, but they may well present one of the most familiar starting points for new players whose gaming experience doesn't usually extend beyond the Start menu of their office PC

Live Arcade also provides an interesting lesson in game evolution. In *Joust* (right) locomotion depends on an ostrich, in *Wik: Fable Of Souls* (below) on Wik's tongue, but both are fluid and frantic takes on negotiating platforms, enemies and collectables

"I think it's a little of both," claims Canessa. "I think it's a little [about] the numbers – sure, they help, but frankly I think it's more of the latter. Because even before we had these enormous numbers to validate the thing, we started to see indications from within the development communities of larger publishers that they were willing to get behind this big time. I think it's because they see what we see. We're a large publisher as well, and we see the industry is getting a little stale, and people are concerned about it. There are a lot of sequels, development costs are through the roof – it costs 20 or 30 million dollars to produce a game now – and so the risk equation is too lopsided; developers, and publishers in particular, are not willing to take risks on titles like they used to. So they'll pump out *Blah Blah 4* and *Blah Blah 5* and there's very little innovation going on – with the exception of titles like *Katamari Damacy*, and we get, what, a couple of those titles every year?

"And at the same time you see a lot of developer dissatisfaction, even when you talk to people in the large studios that support the major publishers, there's a lot of latent dissatisfaction: 'Well, you know, I worked on this title for four years, and I threw my heart and soul into it, and then the publisher didn't market it properly, and it got de-listed in two months, and that's just great, that's four years of my life gone. And I have this great idea, I have *five* great ideas – why can't I go do one of those?' And the only way in the past was for folks either to do a side project, like the *Geometry Wars* guys, or to leave and start their own PC download operation in casual games. But the problems with that is that that market is very specific, in a way, to puzzle games and games for women and older players, and there are certain types of games that sell very well but then there are a lot of genres which haven't done well at all because the audience isn't there. So what Live Arcade does is it opens up the console. It's sort of on the top of all the publishers' radar, because they always care about the console, because that's where there business is aligned nowadays in most cases. And from a development perspective it's an opportunity to come up with a new shooting game, or strategy game, or sim game or 2D platformer, and they have an audience for those types of games because that audience is there on console and it's not there in PC."

It's this trend that makes Live Arcade so important. There are still pitfalls to be negotiated: the interface will need some substantial revision as the service expands, and the arrival of weaker games like the relentlessly vapid *Feeding Frenzy* could possibly weaken confidence in the system. But if standards can be maintained and improved, and an increasing userbase matched with increasing publisher support, then Live Arcade stands a real chance of returning to the days when innovative games were sustainable for small-scale developers, and accessible to whole households of new players. If reports of the arcade's death were greatly exaggerated, then it's hard to imagine how the same could be said of Live Arcade's enormous potential.





Bankshot Billiards (top), with its exhaustive game types and trickshot game modes, is one of the rare Live Arcade games which costs 1,200 points (£10.20) – it would be better value if its AI wasn't so infuriating. *Hardwood Backgammon* (above) offers a cheaper and much more sedate challenge, and also showcases how slick Xbox Live multiplayer modes can bring new life to old games

Coming soon: The next wave of Live Arcade games



Astropop: Don't discount this as a block game or *Arkanoid* clone. This jewel-sorting challenge requires a subtely different form of strategic thinking. It could still benefit from some better balancing and presentational improvements, but it easily earns a place in the gem-filled ranks of *Bejeweled 2* and *Hexic*



Feeding Frenzy: An existing brower-based/download PC game, *Feeding Frenzy*'s dullness doesn't even have the merits of being soporific. It's yet to show any signs of being significantly tweaked for Live Arcade, but it could yet benefit from the kind of visual and structural honing that has strengthened *Marble Blast Ultra* from its earlier incarnations



Hoopworld: Work is still continuing on one of the most graphically ambitious of the upcoming Live Arcade titles. A multiplayer, basketball-based game where you can attack other players with flashy combos, the game is being made with Unreal Engine 3 by Netherlands-based indie developer Streamline Studios



Novadrome: Stainless Games' follow-up to *Crystal Quest* will be *Novadrome*, a 3D multiplayer combat racer put together by the team behind *Carmageddon*. It's still at a very early stage, but promises to bring a bit of pinball chaos and alien-world charm to a game that could well become a Live mainstay



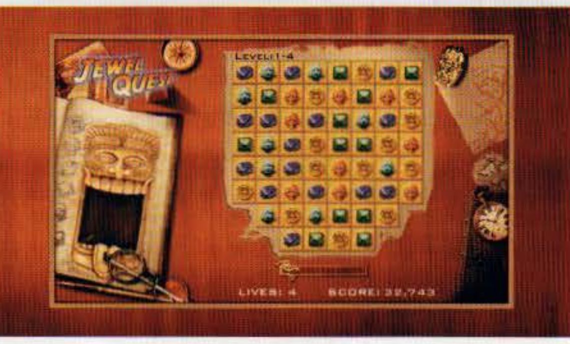
RoboBlitz: Another new project for the service, *RoboBlitz* is also Unreal-based – this Naked Sky Entertainment-developed game is using the engine for mech-inspired thirdperson combat. A taster of what to expect is available in the form of a PC tech demo entitled *RoboHordes*, available from File Planet



Street Fighter II Hyper Fighting: It was an announcement greeted with near-universal enthusiasm, but *Street Fighter II*'s arrival on Live Arcade will mark the first real test of Xbox 360's D-pad, which could just prove to be the only weak aspect of an otherwise excellent controller



Texas Hold 'Em: Seen by Canessa as the next Live Arcade killer app, the prerelease version of this Live-enabled poker game feels a little clumsy. Nonetheless, the game's huge following almost guarantees success, and introduces another innovative financial model – a full, free version will be available for the first month, sponsored by online casino River Belle



Jewel Quest: An object lesson in how one simple change can alter a game's whole dynamic, *Jewel Quest* takes *Bejeweled*'s idle gem swapping and shifts the emphasis to far-sighted tactical planning. Suprisingly engaging presentation and a perfectly judged level-skip option make this a pleasure to play



Crystal Quest: The no-frills, no-mercy original is included as a nod to Mac nostalgists, but the new 360 version is slicker, prettier and comes complete with some impossibly vivid sound effects. Extra downloadable content, such as an enhanced difficulty level, extend the game's lifespan, as well as boosting your all-important high score

Mutant Storm 2: Also still at a fairly early stage. PomPom's full sequel to *Mutant Storm* promises to give full expression to the game's already exceptional visual flair. Add a further refinement of the already smart game modes and scoring systems and this will become a likely lynchpin of second-generation Live Arcade



KEEPING UP

WHERE NOW FOR THE HOUSE THAT LARA BUILT? EIDOS' NEW EXECS, AND ITS GAMES, SET OUT TO PROVIDE THE ANSWERS

What is it, we ask Eidos' head of brands management **Larry Sparks**, that will stand the recently acquired and freshly restructured company apart from other publishers as it strives to re-establish its identity?

"Lara Croft," he replies. And then silence. That's it?

"*Tomb Raider*'s up there – the number one game recognised by people globally. Some great games come along and they're known among the hardcore, but *Tomb Raider* is the sort of franchise that can break away from that into true mass market. Other publishers and companies would give everything to have that as part of their portfolio."

Acquisitions, uncertainty and Lara: the three key words in the Eidos story as it's unravelled over recent years. In August 2004 came a rumbling in the Wall Street Journal of preliminary acquisition talks, framed against the backdrop of the high-profile delays and underperformance of both *Championship Manager 4* and *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness*. March 2005 saw the revelation that the company's cash reserves had dwindled to £11.9 million, with pre-tax losses having risen to £29 million, and a week later US investment group Elevation Partners was embroiled in a bidding war with UK-based SCi for the company's shareholders.

APPEARANCES

Jane Cavanagh, who founded SCi in 1988 and saw its bid through to success, remembers the internal discussions that arose in January 2005. "The reason we looked at it was because the company was interesting in its own right," she reveals, "but importantly, we knew a lot of the Eidos shareholders well because they'd been institutional shareholders in SCi for many years. During January and February, we managed to bring in irrevocable undertakings from about three or four of them that basically said they were supporting our bid, and that even if another one came in they would continue that support.

"Elevation put forward a 50p per share cash bid which simply wasn't interesting to shareholders, because if they cashed out at 50p a lot of them

LET'S GO TO WORK

Title: **Reservoir Dogs**
Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox** Release: **TBA**
Developer: **Blitz Games**

One of several SCi titles to be (ahem) stuck in the middle when the Eidos buyout transpired, Blitz's adaptation of Tarantino's low-budget phenomenon is finally taking shape. There isn't a great deal to say, as what we've seen amounts to little more than a cutscene, but the one striking feature of *Dogs* (a more opportunistic licence than old Eidos would likely have sought) is the mo-capped animation that's said to be representative of in-game action. Michael Madsen has been secured to lend the game some credibility, but it seems he's the only participant from the original (and now dwindling) cast. The obvious anxiety is that a movie where much is left to the imagination won't translate all that well into a game that's keen to fill in the blanks. Eidos' argument is that Tarantino himself wanted more to be shown and less to be suggested in the budget-restricted film – but Spielberg wanted more shark in Jaws too.

PLANE SAILING

Title: **Battlestations: Midway**
Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox** Release: **Q2** Developer: **In-house**



At one point scheduled for an additional Gizmondo release (which must surely be in jeopardy now that the mothership has sunk), this *Carrier Command*-style air and sea combat title bears an interesting design that claims to occupy everything from 6,000ft above water to 500ft below. That means submarines, aircraft carriers, battleships and planes all in battle at once (during certain missions, at least) and all available for the player to control. With over 100 planes potentially in flight at once, it's imperative that the game's AI strikes a balance between capability and restraint when handling nonplayer units. There looks like being plenty to keep an eye on during battles which, for a game aimed primarily at console audiences, is sure to be a marketing concern. The four-versus-four team-based multiplayer mode, however, could prove an effective compensatory lure.

would have crystallised a huge loss having bought in years earlier at many, many pounds. If they could take SCi's shares then, provided we performed well and delivered on our results, they'd have the upside of the value they could derive from those shares. Thankfully, that's what's happened."

Cavanagh's company would have known, as would any that'd cared to observe its unfortunate public affairs, that Eidos was no simple restoration. This was the company that bought and poured money into Ion Storm before closing it after a succession of high-profile walkouts, each of which drove a final nail into one troubled project or other. Founders John Romero and Tom Hall left its Dallas studio as the indulgent *Daikatana* was fragged by critics; *Deus Ex* mastermind Warren Spector (who'd seen the aforementioned FPS starve his own Looking Glass studio into closure in 2000) left Austin years later when both *Deus Ex: Invisible War* and *Thief: Deadly Shadows* met similar fates. All of this, of course, was prelude to the catastrophic sixth *Tomb Raider* – a title that tore both the licence and the heart from creator Core Design.





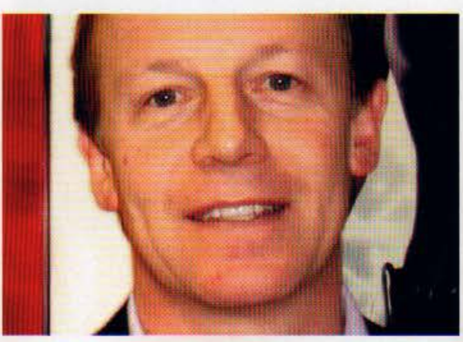
"If online gaming takes off in the west the way it has in Korea or the increase in mobile gaming really hits," believes Livingstone (above), "it's important that we can move our content on to whatever delivery mechanism is the choice of the day." Sparks (top) is also keen to play up the company's flexibility, stressing that the pursuit of Activision-style licensing agreements in the future is a possibility, but certainly not part of any fixed agenda

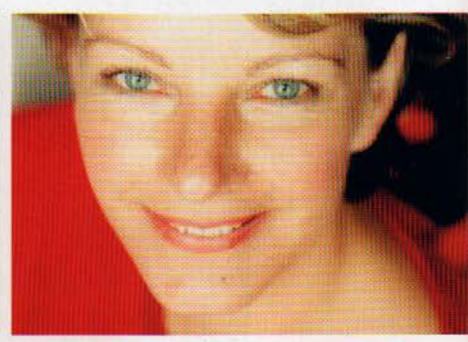
A new management structure and a gutsy revision of the company's release schedule, however, have drawn a line under the ignominy of old Eidos. Looking over what she now controls, does Cavanagh appreciate what the company was doing wrong? "The first thing was that the cost base was huge compared to the size and the revenue," she begins. "Certain cost-cutting measures could and should have happened a long time before. When we looked at the company back in January, it was clear to us that the proposed release schedule for titles such as *Tomb Raider* and *Hitman* was simply unrealistic. For example, they were meant to come out in April of last year. It was clear to us that it was very unlikely to happen, so they were going to continue the trend of missing forecasts and not delivering on the key franchises, and they were also going to ruin the potential of those brands going forward."

"IN JANUARY '04, IT WAS CLEAR THE SCHEDULE FOR TITLES SUCH AS TOMB RAIDER AND HITMAN WAS UNREALISTIC. THEY WERE DUE IN APRIL '04"

And how was that cost base reduced so quickly? "There were certain things like the obvious duplication costs which, by bringing the two companies together, you can dramatically reduce where there's an overlap. Also, things like delisting from the US stock exchange: not only does that have a certain cost attached to it, but there are a number of people you need to simply fuel being on the stock market. There were certain areas where there were too many people, certain offices that couldn't justify the costs of being kept open."

As you'll see over the next few pages, Eidos' revised approach has done a great job of stabilising the development of its inflated portfolio. Potentially disastrous ambitions such as those of *Just Cause*





"I think the important thing for us is that we can project our products on a global basis," says Dodkins (left) when asked about the company's Britishness. "The British bit is of importance – it's like United Kingdom plc – and we're happy to offer that as a soft upside. It reflects well on all of us as British people." Having engineered the acquisition, Cavanagh (right) is committed to reestablishing the brand




Hitman remains one of Eidos' strongest IPs; *Blood Money* will benefit from a schedule that'll allow it polishing time

are now being achieved, while titles that once seemed destined to be rushed in deficient forms on to shelves – titles such as *Hitman: Blood Money* and the crucial *Tomb Raider Legend* – are nearing more genuine states of completion. But because that portfolio is an amalgamation, derived from companies with apparently different product acquisition philosophies, we find ourselves asking that question again: how are we to identify the new Eidos brand? Surely it isn't *all* about Lara?

"I think one of the biggest differences [between Eidos and its rivals] is that we are great believers in the creation and ownership of original content," believes **Ian Livingstone**, the Games Workshop co-founder who worked his way up through Domark until its merger with Eidos in 1995, before riding the rollercoaster until the acquisition and management restructure led to his departure and subsequent reemployment last year. "Other publishers rely more on obtaining film, comic or sports licences. I'm not saying that's bad, because clearly those licensed games have had spectacular success, but it is risky and it is very expensive. I think *Tomb Raider* demonstrates the success of original content if you get it right. Major companies pay *us* money to use Lara Croft for *their* products."

We wonder how that philosophy tallies with those of Sparks and European managing director **Scott Dodkins**, both having arrived at Eidos from compulsive licensee Activision. "The issue of buying licences is something you have to look into very carefully," Dodkins explains, "because the costs of entry are high. Whether or not we're well positioned to buy into really hot North American film licences or major sporting licences remains to be seen, but I don't think it's a stated ambition. We can achieve what we want to working with the internal IPs that we already own."

But for how long will this be the case? What if – and this is perfectly conceivable – the next five years see interest in gaming's leading lady wane once the novelty of *Legend* has worn off?

"Well, we don't accept that," responds Sparks. "We don't see any end or sell-by date to Lara. If we can keep her relevant and enjoyable, then she'll be

IT'S COMING HOME?

Title: **Championship Manager 2006**
Format: **PC, Xbox** Release: **Q2**
Developer: **In-house**



***Championship Manager* producer Steve Didd is the first to admit that the series' fifth title – the first since Eidos' amicable split from Sports Interactive – was "pretty unfinished." As an attempt to stop the original developer's *Football Manager* (the Sega-published continuation of the *CM* code base) becoming the people's *Championship*, it was widely considered a failure. He is predictably keen to stress that the new season will have a different outcome, and much of Eidos' reputation can be seen as resting on its success.**

In its bid to win back (or should that be steal?) the soccer-sim marketplace, *CM2006* has acquired a number of features geared specifically toward the mainstream. A 3D engine allows multiple camera angles during matches while the Club Benefactor feature offers to stave off financial peril for those without business acumen. Significantly, the game's processing of matches is now said to be faster than that of its rival, with matches in other world leagues being played out as a background task and available for scrutiny at any time.

LOOSE CHANGE

Title: **Hitman: Blood Money**
Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox** Release: **Q2** Developer: **IO Interactive**



When you're told that one of gaming's most demanding (and therefore rewarding) series is being restructured for the benefit of the entry-level player, you have to question the wisdom. But then you also have to appreciate that the professionalism of Agent 47 is in no small part shared by *Hitman*'s accomplished developer. *Contracts* – the third instalment – was far from its best, but a better than average game nonetheless. *Blood Money*, on a similar note, is a more accessible title than the likes of *Stealth Assassin*, but is also subtle in its provision of helping hands.

Being caught where you shouldn't be by a patrolling guard is no longer a guarantee of exposure; generous warnings stand between a mistake and failure, and similar nuances make the game's AI feel more natural than before. The game's interface binds keys to commands not only functionally but visually, each available action having its assigned key pictured alongside. For those concerned about the series otherwise becoming stale, one glimpse of the Mardi Gras mission (in which hundreds of fully detailed civilians really do appear on screen at once) should offer reassurance.



CITY UNDER SIEGE

Title: **Urban Chaos: Riot Response**
Format: **PS2, Xbox** Release: **Q2** Developer: **Rocksteady**



Having survived both Argonaut's demise and the concerns of parent publisher SCi, the team at Rocksteady has been through a lot, but not nearly as much as the characters in the anarchic shooter formerly known as *Zero Tolerance*. Most of the opportunities to play down the game's subtitle are being taken – a policy certain to cause confusion among those who remember Mucky Foot's own *Urban Chaos*, which Eidos published back in 2000.

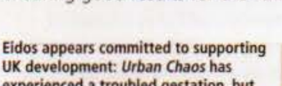
The superiority of this title seems assured, however, thanks to the apparent cleverness of its design. Its *PDZ*-style riot shield is as rousing as ever, picking up increasing numbers of bulletholes and bloody smears as you barge and block your way through the madness of its levels. The game is adhering to a policy of positive reinforcement rather than punishment, and offers between 70 and 80 unlockable game items (alongside over 200 collectable medals) as proof.

here forever." Is there a chance that she might be buoyed, once the financial butterflies have settled, by the return of some past names – a *Thief* or a *Deus Ex*, perhaps? "It's quite right that with the next-gen platforms it's good practice to reassess IP. We'd consider whether it has merits, and whether it'd still have credence in the marketplace."

On the subject of new-generation hardware, has Eidos formulated any plans for approaching a platform such as Revolution – charged as it is with the kind of innovative vigour that saw the company come unstuck in the past? "I think with all new platforms that are introduced, we as a company would always consider a platform that gives us access to the mass as opposed to niche market," claims Sparks. "It's certainly something we'll consider. We never rule anything out."

Caution clearly remains the primary tongue of the men whose job it is to reformulate Eidos' image of reliability. There's turbulence in its history that simply can't be allowed to eke into the present – at least not yet. From development and management to stockholder levels, the firm craves assuredness, and by the end of this year we'll know whether it's achieved it. It has to be said that things are looking up. Eidos is aiming for 80 per cent average review scores in mainstream mags, and there's little in its upcoming catalogue to say that's unachievable.

But in terms of the company's status as the last of the great British publishers, will all of this turn out to be moot? As talk circulates of a potential complete buyout – most likely from abroad – is the revival of Eidos simply prettying it up for the eyes of, say, EA or Ubisoft? "As a public company, if we get approached we're obliged to listen to what the other party has to say," declares Cavanagh. "If they make an offer, we have to consider that and make a recommendation accordingly. But this is not something we've gone out to do: as far as we're concerned, we've bought the company, the integration has gone well, our first set of results has been very good and we're focused on building the company and ensuring good results for the future."



LABOURS LOST?

Keen followers of Eidos' and SCi's portfolios will notice a few omissions from the selection featured here. No one is willing to comment, for example, on the status of *Free Running* – the PSP parkour title that may have reversed the fortunes of Core Design following its maligned *Smartbomb*. No announcement is forthcoming for Pivotal's next project, either, though the odds of a new *Conflict* title must be good considering Eidos' desire for reliable brand instalments. As previously mentioned, there are no current plans for *Deus Ex* or *Thief* sequels, though fans of *The Nomad Soul* will be pleased to know that its sequel has been underway at Quantic Dream since early last year.



Eidos appears committed to supporting UK development: *Urban Chaos* has experienced a troubled gestation, but the publisher has retained its faith in a project that's now looking promising



TARGET RENEGADE

Title: **Rogue Trooper**
Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox** Release: **Q2** Developer: **Rebellion**



Compared to a Megacity that spans the entire eastern seaboard of the US, Nu-Earth gives Rebellion a greater opportunity to mix up its level design while keeping its scenery faithful. As in the comic strip, the planet is constantly war-torn, stained with toxic hues



The most regrettable aspect of *Dredd Versus Death* was that suddenly gamers – specifically those with a one-time 2000AD subscription to their name – had plenty to lose. The game's authenticity (tangible, though far from universal) bore out Rebellion's desire to respectfully adapt its newly acquired catalogue, but various design, distribution and technical stumbles put in jeopardy all that had been achieved. Though the silence surrounding *Rogue Trooper* has broken in this final run up to release, the anticipation remains little more than a cautiously optimistic murmur.

How few of *Dredd*'s mistakes Rebellion has brought to Nu-Earth is something we won't ascertain until the code is in our hands, but the developer has clearly retained its knack for capturing flavour. The Asura engine has once again lacquered its subject's neon-lit rust and barren ruin with convincing comic-book overtones, and the voices of Rogue and his brothers in arms (who are, in fact, alive for the opening three stages) are fine approximations of how they're commonly imagined. Character models are importantly a great deal more accurate than those of *Dredd*, and *Rogue*'s musical score is another well-suited industrial symphony from that game's composer.

As expected, the implementation of biochip comrades Gunnar, Bagman and Helm makes the most of an opportunity that Rebellion really had no choice in taking. Both essential series characters and ideal videogame devices, they may well either make or break the game as they flex their functionality at its AI. Their applications are logical: Gunnar (implanted into Rogue's rifle) can be used as a remote turret, Bagman (his backpack) can dispense equipment and upgrades, and Helm (his helmet) can hack consoles and provide other such logistical support. Without them, you still have abilities such as blind-fire and stealth attacks to play with, and beyond them there's the salvage system that offers a strong degree of character customisation. Admittedly, there's little here that couldn't be bound to a bog-standard, unassisted action lead, but with Rogue Trooper it's the split personality that comes with the package that provides much of the appeal.

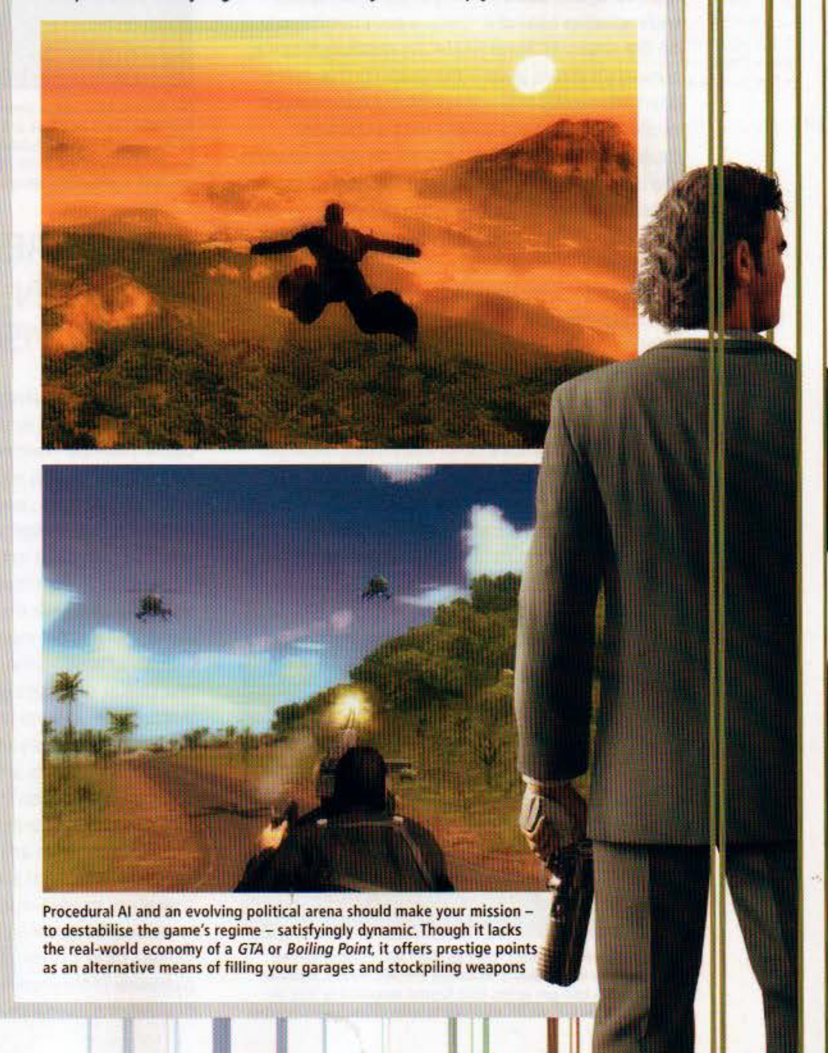
THE JUNGLE IS MASSIVE

Title: **Just Cause**
Format: **360, PC, PS2, Xbox** Release: **Q3** Developer: **Avalanche Studios**

Halfway through our follow-up presentation of *Just Cause* it becomes official: games are to be measured in Jamaicas from hereon in. Having been slashed to half the scale of the high-end tech demo we were shown before, the thirdperson sandbox shooter remains a daunting half-Jamaica in size, playing host to 108 vehicles, over 300 towns and villages, 21 story missions and 121 secondary mission types. Its capital alone is said to be comparable to Liberty City, and draw distance on the Xbox version is more than enough for you to appreciate the scale. For a game not due until the latter half of the year, its framerate is also impeccably smooth.

As we suspected, Avalanche's development plan – to turn its console project into an exhibitionist PC engine and then downgrade and port accordingly – has paid off. On Xbox it's an achievement to rival and possibly surpass that of *Far Cry: Instincts*; on PS2 it promises to be even more remarkable than *San Andreas*; on 360 it could make *Test Drive Unlimited* look constrained. There's a lot of European enthusiasm in this project's scale, and a lot of Swedish savvy in its design.

Performance merit aside, though, there are plenty of provisos that we can only hope the team is aware of. Digital orienteering is no fun without variety and character, for example, and a key requirement of any sandbox is ample opportunity for play. The most convenient way of summarising the game's action is as a pared-down version of *Total Overdose* with embellished sandbox credentials. The strafe-shooting and gun emplacement sections seem somewhat rigid for such an open experience, but elsewhere the base jumping and other parachute-assisted stunts look a world of fun. Avalanche has responded well to the need for adequate mobility, and there seems little chance that you'll lose yourself in its dense wilds for long enough to lose your enthusiasm. At least if you do find yourself wandering aimlessly from shore to shore (and across the water to the next shore), you'll have those comprehensive day/night and weather cycles to keep you distracted.



Procedural AI and an evolving political arena should make your mission – to destabilise the game's regime – satisfyingly dynamic. Though it lacks the real-world economy of a *GTA* or *Boiling Point*, it offers prestige points as an alternative means of filling your garages and stockpiling weapons



NATIONAL TREASURE

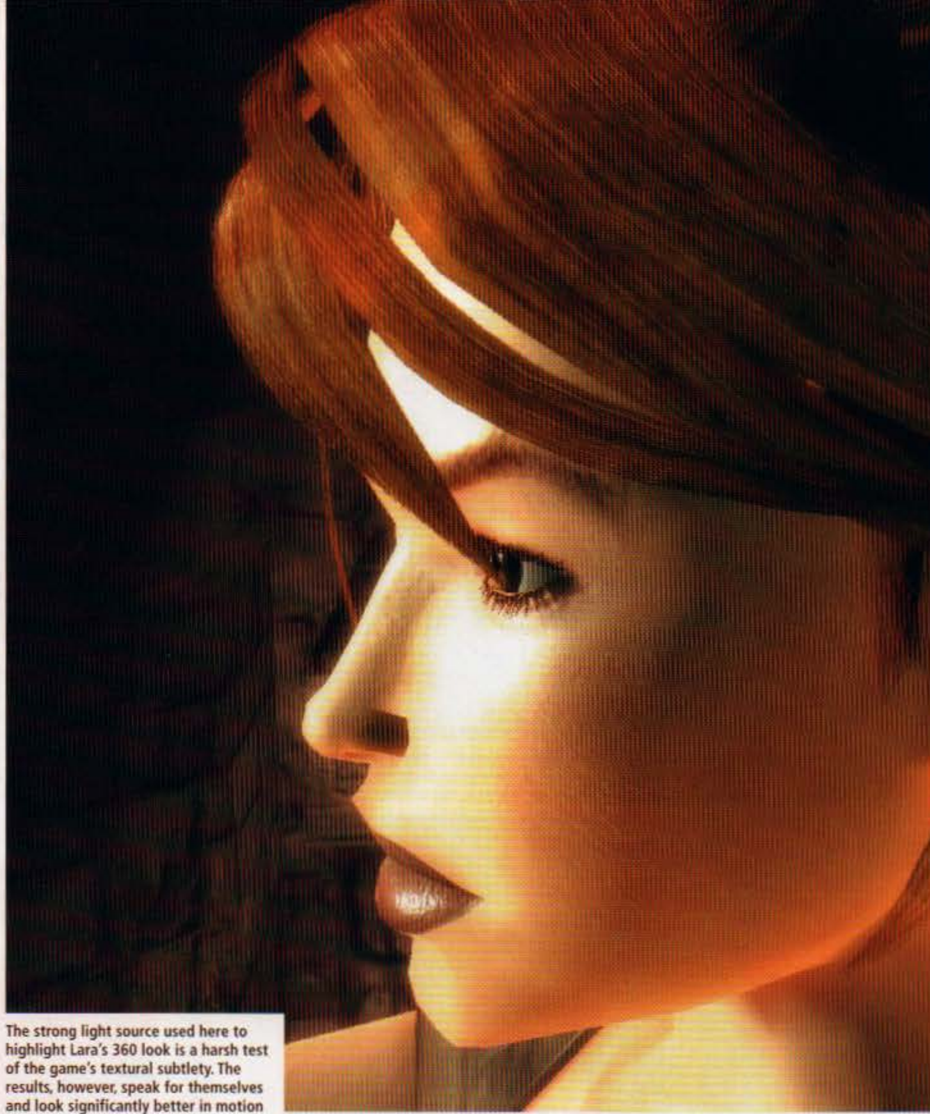
Title: **Tomb Raider: Legend**
Format: **360, PC, PS2, PSP, Xbox**
Release: **April** Developer: **Crystal Dynamics**

For a company that's making every effort to put such activities behind it, Eidos is gambling heavily on the return of *Tomb Raider*. By extolling it as the company's crown jewel – the property that sets it apart from every rival – it's putting a huge weight on the shoulders of a project with a distinctly modest attitude. The brief is commendably candid: mend the design, keep the faith and see what happens. Whether you value the Britishness of its publisher or not, you can't help but wish the best for something so genuine.

We've seen lengthy stretches of the game's introductory levels, along with a gunfight in a Tokyo high-rise and a traumatic flashback stage that establishes one of the story's thickest threads, and while we've spoken before of how Crystal Dynamics has captured much of *Tomb Raider's* mystique, the full scale of its efforts only emerges now. The break from grid-based movement, the employment of famous voice talent, the scripting of the series' deepest storyline and the commitment to achieving optimum quality on all formats make quite an impact when they hit you all at once.



None of *Legend's* versions come up short when flooding their environments with shadow. Naturally, the 360 version achieves more than its last-gen peers, with Crystal maintaining that the 60fps performance can be achieved in spite of the improvements



The strong light source used here to highlight Lara's 360 look is a harsh test of the game's textural subtlety. The results, however, speak for themselves and look significantly better in motion

DIRT IS REPRESENTED DOWN TO THE FINEST MARK ON 360. THE SAME GOES FOR MOISTURE, WHICH VISIBLY SATURATES LARA'S COSTUMES

While there's plenty to say about the game's implementation (it is, after all, picking the series baton from the floor where it was dropped), there isn't a great deal to report on its design. Everyone's seen the new Lara, and while the game is trying its hardest to mix things up, it's no *Sands Of Time* in terms of puzzles or action. Lara's skills are portrayed more sensibly than they have been before – she'll reach out and grab if she falls from a ledge, for example – but the mode of play still falls into that pattern of missing the occasional jump and placing one peg or other (it's giant concrete balls in the puzzle we're shown) into its corresponding hole. Yet that's the game's sell, just as it was plummeting into bottomless pits when Overworks remade *Shinobi*. The goal isn't so much to change the way Lara goes about her business as to make the process as intuitive as fans always wanted it to be.

Still the PS2 and Xbox versions of the game are a pleasure to see in motion, and that motion is confirmed as being locked at 30fps. But with gamers soon to be regarding those as legacy platforms (if they don't already), it's a relief to see that Eidos is longer shy of demonstrating its more ambitious builds. Since the HD era began, the terms 'upgrade' and 'bump-map' have become synonymous thanks to the clumsy implementation of one in attempts to justify the other. The notorious technique should by now have established itself as a delicate artistic tool, but instead it makes both flesh and environment look like Anaglypta wallpaper on an all-too-frequent basis. Together with the other hallmarks of the cheap and nasty modern port – sloppy framerates, inadequate antialiasing and crass special effects – it's one of the unwelcome qualities assumed of *Legend* 360 when it was announced at X05.

What Crystal has achieved, however, with a day-by-day policy of asset sharing and a dedicated team of 25 artists, is uplifting to say the least. Yes, it involves the re-texturing of more or less every object, but with a modesty and grace beyond those lowly expectations. The grounding influence may well be Lara herself – arguably the most fragile 3D object an artist could be tasked with decorating. Deeming the safe approach – we'll call it the *DOA4* approach for the sake of clarity – to be inappropriate, the team has bravely given the







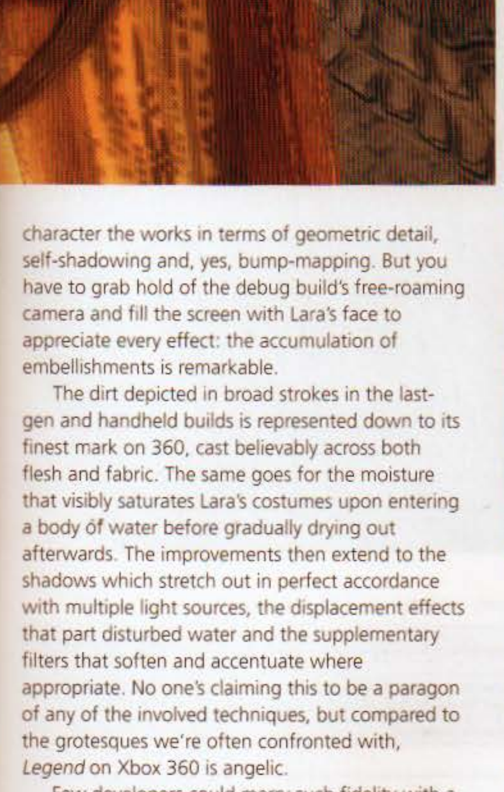




While it isn't known exactly what kind of unlockables will feature in *Legend*, players will find a multitude of collectables in its various locations that can then be viewed in Croft Manor – an isolated part of the game accessible from the main menu

DATA MINOR

Perhaps not the best reflection of PSP's independence as a gaming platform, the superiority of the *Legend* port it's about to receive is a nonetheless heartening addition to its second wave of titles. Having endured the handheld's *Warrior Within* port (a game that occasionally had us thinking the machine had switched off), however, we were quick to notice a few dark corners that could pose visibility problems for its screen. Hopefully, Crystal Dynamics will just as quickly recognise the disastrous potential of such an issue for a game with Tomb in its title and brighten things up. It would be a particularly crushing oversight because, with its textures almost imperceptibly scaled down, the game looks beautiful.

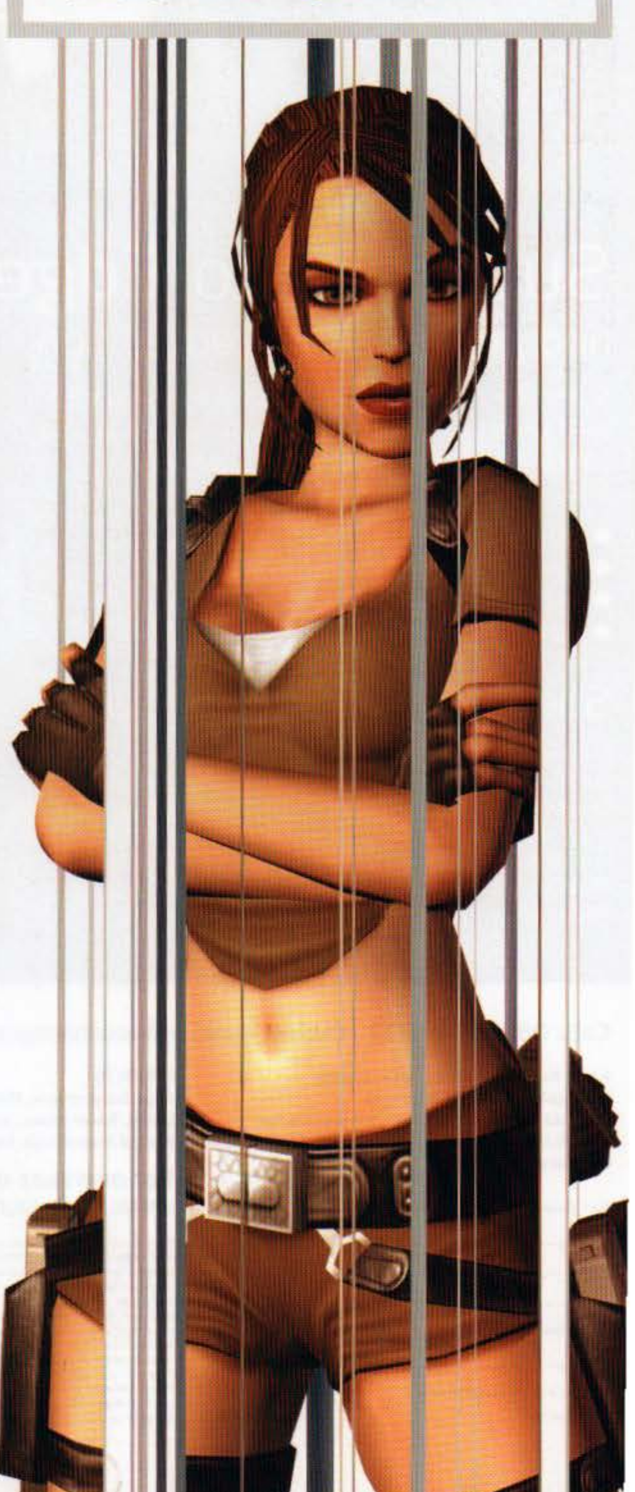


character the works in terms of geometric detail, self-shadowing and, yes, bump-mapping. But you have to grab hold of the debug build's free-roaming camera and fill the screen with Lara's face to appreciate every effect: the accumulation of embellishments is remarkable.

The dirt depicted in broad strokes in the last-gen and handheld builds is represented down to its finest mark on 360, cast believably across both flesh and fabric. The same goes for the moisture that visibly saturates Lara's costumes upon entering a body of water before gradually drying out afterwards. The improvements then extend to the shadows which stretch out in perfect accordance with multiple light sources, the displacement effects that part disturbed water and the supplementary filters that soften and accentuate where appropriate. No one's claiming this to be a paragon of any of the involved techniques, but compared to the grotesques we're often confronted with, *Legend* on Xbox 360 is angelic.

Few developers could marry such fidelity with a claim of constant 60fps performance, but memories of the Dreamcast port of *Soul Reaver* are difficult to dismiss. Though even *Quake 4* couldn't achieve consistent performance in its own 360 adaptation, you can't help but have faith in the guardians of *Legacy Of Kain* when they say that this port (the code base is that of the PS2 version) will run as smoothly as you'd hope.

If there's a concern, it's that the sum of Crystal's efforts – the transformation of Lara from grid-constrained mannequin to modern thirdperson heroine – might amount to less than Eidos believes. Toby Gard maintains that she has something the other girls don't, but having enjoyed the companies of Vanessa Schneider, Alyx Vance and Jade throughout the post-*Raider* years, we've yet to decide whether it's something truly distinctive. For all its gadgets and grace, you'd be excused for fearing the same of the game's overall design, but if those are the worst-case scenarios then they're reassuringly mild. Lara may emerge an ageing beauty in spite of modern cosmetics, but attractive she seems certain to remain.



Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Contra: Shattered Soldier



It isn't even about achieving those perfect hit rates, but simply getting through that boss marathon of a final stage. Note to Itagaki: this is how a difficult game is made.
PS2, KONAMI

Trackmania Nations ESWC



The grand prize of $400,000 pales compared to the reward for merely taking part in this year's Electronic Sports World Cup – a beautifully polished free-for-all for cursor keys.
PC, NADEO

Rogue Galaxy



It will be well worth waiting for the English-language release, but in the meantime it's hard to resist a taste test of Jester's vibrant, if incomprehensible, adventures.
PS2, SONY

Depressive repulsive disorder

Why can't games just keep it simple?



How wise was it for *Mark Ecko's Getting Up* to model its menu screens on something already indelibly associated in many people's minds with frustration, annoyance and resentment?

The single greatest piece of technology in the world is probably still the book. Compact, self-contained, relatively durable, one of its greatest strengths is that all you need to do to use it is look at it. Simply train your eyes on a page and kapow! It's done its job. The human brain, itself being a pretty nifty piece of technology, is capable of taking in a huge amount of information at a glace – so why won't game makers let it?

A worrying proportion of this month's games – including *Black*, *Mark Ecko's Getting Up* and *Rule Of Rose* – all feature elaborate menu screens which have to slide in, scroll up, sketch round and generally amuse themselves while your eyes patiently wait to be allowed to do what they could have accomplished in less than a blink. It's behaviour that borders on the obsessive compulsive: games that have to wash their hands a dozen times, turn the lights on and off and spit over your shoulder before they can tell you what's in your inventory or whether or not you can save. Your eyes are left flicking impatiently, your thumbs tapping out phantom selections on the D-pad while you wait for the menu to check its teeth for spinach before it lets you in. It may only be a second or two each time, but it can up to dozens of moments of annoyance. Worse still is when the game catches up with your premature selections a moment too late, leaving you saving when you should be loading, or inverted when you should be normal.

Games need a strong visual identity to bind the experience together, and that identity should start on the splash screen and carry you through to the finish. The impact that well-designed menu screens can have in sustaining a sense of immersion is clear from how jarring the appearance of the 360's innocuous grey blade can be as it slides into the vibrant fantasy of something like *Kameo*. But while aesthetic continuity is crucial, leaving a player rattling the joypad in bleary eyed frustration is hardly a recipe for keeping disbelief happily suspended. There's no reason that menus can't be works of art as well as of information: static, dramatic and charismatic. As we push into a multi-cored, high-definition future, it could be worth looking back at a technology that was dependent on nothing more than shredded trees.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



BLACK

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: FEBRUARY 28 PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: CRITERION
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E157, E159





Unlike *Perfect Dark Zero*'s melodramatic pansies, *Black*'s enemies leave you in no doubt of the effects of your bullets. Their animations make an unmistakable distinction between a death throe and an injured flinch while a first-time headshot will throw them brutally to the floor

If the last great FPS novelty was bullet-time, the creators of the *Burnout* series have just proposed another: leisure-time – a gluttonous new action dynamic in which your primary purpose is to gorge on mayhem. At least, that's the impression on *Black* playthrough number one. Its eastern Europe is a focused sandbox of gas and gunpowder in which natural law has been supplanted by action movie lore. You can't help but think that when *Killzone* suggested that a modern FPS need little interface beyond the gun and the grenade, someone was taking notes. This genre debut for Criterion, however, realises that the supposed need to pander to the Hollywood example is a sham. Games can go one better if they wish; *Black* goes two for good measure.

Each of its strongly identified stages is combustible to a point where you'd be excused for firing at the ground to see if the world exploded. There's barely an object within that doesn't bear telltale seams of destructibility, and blasts aren't so much special effects as domino effects that send scenery and conjured debris high into the air in unpredictable patterns. It excels at contrasts and transitions: between silence and clamour, for example, stealth and siege or gun metal and light beams. If this is a time when textures in games are curiously at both their most and least important (due to HD and mastery of visual effects respectively), then *Black* is a celebration of the latter. Much like *Burnout Revenge*, it's a last hurrah for last-gen RenderWare that achieves nothing short of spectacular results on PS2.



A large proportion of *Black*'s spectacle was inevitably going to be scripted rather than dynamic. There are plenty of moments, for example, where enemies will crowd around a container lorry of TNT that has every warning short of 'Stand elsewhere, idiot' emblazoned on its side. But how else would you achieve the above?

As was the promise from day one, it also features some of the best audio its genre has ever known. What you don't see you still appreciate, and we dread to think how such a convincing library of punched-flesh effects was obtained. Its symphony of gunfire is just that: a percussive, orchestrated and at times even vocal chorus of shots, impacts and whistling flights. Imagine fuel ignited, metal wrenched, wood splintered and glass smashed all at once in a seismic sonic belch, repeated with enough variation to sound fresh after 20 hours of play.

But beyond aesthetics, for an FPS to work without any of the modern genre's crutches – without a multiplayer mode, radar system or exploratory pretence – requires a refined combat model and intuitive map design. That *Black* works accordingly is an achievement in itself. Though much within follows a linear script, setpieces occur throughout where the AI, given room to breathe and time to think, defies expectations and often overwhelms. The game's artistically nondescript enemies are satisfyingly reluctant to settle into predictable routines; expect them to begin bobbing up and down like the targets on a Whack-A-Mole cabinet and, nine times out of ten, you'll be surprised.

An interesting by-product of a game where everything blows up is that your use of weapons is inclined to change. Bullets and bombs become multipliers (or at the very least catalysts) for all manner of explosive chain reactions, and the game encourages mastery of these as a means of countering the speed at which firefights can escalate. It certainly doesn't pursue some of the concept's more exciting possibilities (see 'Mr Self Destruct') – the headshot remains king and the game often lapses into a more conventional barrel-shoot than was promised – but it seems we have to accept this as part and parcel of Criterion's long-term strategy for developing a franchise. At least enough has been achieved in *Black* to make the deferral of such potential to its inevitable sequel no big issue.

The game earns additional merit because in spite of its single sequence of events, it provides three experiences, each defined by a differing degree of restraint. Two of these are initially locked behind intimidating objectives – complete the game once for Hard mode, then again at that level for Black Ops – and

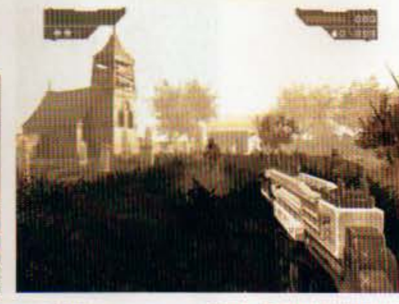
> Its blasts aren't so much special effects as domino effects that send scenery and conjured debris high into the air in unpredictable patterns

Rather than do your job for you, AI assistance looses off moderately ineffectual shots while drawing the enemy's fire – a no less invaluable service. Such is the quality of AI in *Black* that you'll never see them trundle into walls, fall into behaviour loops or stand idle while bullets fly









An entrenched enemy doesn't give up its position on a whim. They'll rest so long as you keep quiet then erupt into an attack if you betray your position. Catch them with a few glancing shots or accurately pitch in a grenade, however, and the odds of them breaking from cover will rise







Mr Self Destruct



Black Ops mode may well be gaming's first incident of euthanasia – *Black's* way of asking champion players, with the aid of a devastating new weapon and unlimited ammo, to utterly annihilate it on a farewell tour. It's a great reward for what amounts to two completions, but in spite of this it's not what we were hoping for. A sophisticated score attack mode could have turned this great game into something better still, but instead we're given an instruction to seek out every last secondary objective in order to proceed – a tiresome task considering how innocuous they sometimes are. Still, it's better than the usual extras and its stress-relief value is undeniable.



What you might call the shellshock effect serves many purposes. By muffling and slowing the game's audio it provides an unmistakable low health alarm, the reduction in pace giving you a vital slither of time to seek shelter. It also has the curious effect of making the Uzi sound like a beanbag

for some those hoops will be too high to warrant the journey. But for those who become sufficiently intoxicated by the vivid spectacle and intricately rendered headshots, the game pulls off that difficult FPS coup: providing a difficulty level that merely lowers your ability to replenish health, but is nonetheless transformative.

To play *Black* on Hard is to see its entire mode of combat reversed. Rampages of blind turns and wasteful shots (for heavier artillery, at least) are quickly reduced to a last-ditch tactic. So acute is the change that, at first, it feels disastrous. In terms of everything the game has established – its bedlam and recklessness – it seems counter-productive. Explosions become largely strategic because to gawp at the aftermath is to risk catching a bullet, and plain old walls become your best friends. Ultimately, it's an extraordinary turnaround that has you appreciating every kill and collateral blast in a way that Normal mode barely suggests.

But the fact remains that this is the same ride repeated. We won't dwell on its story as it's of minimal importance, but suffice it to say: a Don 'The Dragon' Wilson movie wants its plot back. The missions are so purposefully bereft of substance that they could be played in any order with no adjustment beyond the intensity of their AI and the arrangement of pickups. Beginning with a weapon cocked and ending as the last casing hits the ground, they care about nothing else.

Criterion's ability to make the technology and design of modern games seem harmonious is a significant strength in an industry where few can pull it off. It twiddles the knobs of RenderWare with uncanny insight into when to fake and when to calculate, and *Black* is a fiery example of what can result. It isn't subtle, nor is it as sophisticated as some would wish for, but it nonetheless leaves a sizeable crater in a landscape where even HD titles struggle to leave an impression. **[8]**



Introduced at generally appropriate times, the score from long-time game and now TV (Alias, Lost) composer Michael Giacchino is excellent. A little overbearing as it plays during the straight-faced opening titles, it soon establishes several memorable themes



FULL AUTO

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: PSEUDO INTERACTIVE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E158





***Full Auto*'s absurd physics are geared towards immense, gravity-suspending jumps. The game often volunteers a slow-mo replay, but these are also available at a touch of the D-pad**



The damage modelling has no effect on handling – and it never seems to dull the cars' excessive showroom shine – but it's an effective visual reminder of the state of your armour. You'll need to weave constantly to stop the front going first

You couldn't ask for a more typical console 'launch window' title than *Full Auto*. Conceptually, it's the lowest common denominator, a prefab design knocked together in haste from the most readily available, standard-issue spare parts in the bin: cars and guns. It's aesthetically conservative too, a brash teen fantasy aimed squarely at spoilt boys, smothering its relatively minor graphical advances in a dazzling shower of sparks and flame. And it unapologetically nabs its better ideas from the last generation's latter-day heroes: in this case, the *Burnout* series, and (in an admittedly inspired cross-genre lift of time-rewinding powers) *Prince Of Persia*.

All the same, Sega has to be given credit for being practically the only publisher to date showing commitment to bringing exclusive titles based on fresh IP to 360. It may be that neither *Full Auto* nor the similarly lightweight, if more original, *Condemned* provides a totally new gaming experience to accompany the new generation of hardware, but they do at least provide nominally new games for it, and for this – as well as for their simple pleasures – we should be grateful.

> Sega has to be given credit for being practically the only publisher to date showing commitment to bringing exclusive titles based on fresh IP to 360

For all that it has the extreme outward aggression of a combat game, *Full Auto* actually leans toward the racing half of its crudely spliced DNA. Even the tutorials set time limits to their introduction of the game's core concepts: twin weapon sets, usually front- and rear-mounted; a boost meter charged by powerslides and jumps; and the 'Wreck Points' scoring system, which rewards damage to environment, traffic and opponents, additionally charging the Unwreck meter. The latter allows time to be rewound (in singleplayer only – it's impracticable, if sorely missed, in multiplayer) in order to avert disaster, or take another shot at an opportunity for a juicy kill. But it's a telling indication of the game's balance that you'll more often use it to retake bodged cornering lines.

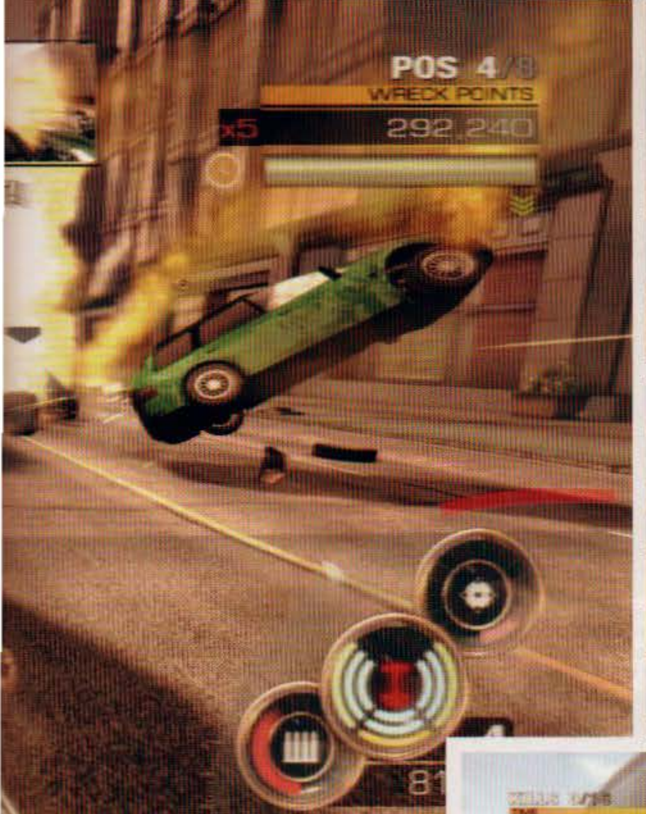
Nonetheless, Unwreck is a generous piece of progressive thinking in an otherwise reactionary videogame. *Full Auto* is chaotic, a dense, noisy headlong rush for the finishing line characterised by grotesquely exaggerated physics, slapdash handling and the maddeningly unfair AI catch-up of an early *Mario Kart*. It's desperate never to be dull for a second, but everything that makes it fun – and it certainly is, in an utterly dumb,





Few of the unsurprisingly unlicensed vehicles is exactly pretty, but a number have a crude retro appeal. The tow-truck (right) is the slowest and hardiest of the slow and hardy class C cars, arguably the most fun vehicles









The courses occasionally lead you through environmental hazards, like the burning City Hall (left). The city is represented in moderate detail and with excellent draw distance, but has the standardised, cold, empty gloss of the locations of so many arcade racers (below)





While swinging your vehicle wide through corners may slow you down, it provides an excellent opportunity to do more damage, since Pseudo has thoughtfully carpeted the run-off areas with destructible furniture

gratuitous way – also has the potential to make it intensely frustrating. Thankfully, Unwreck hands it a get-out-of-jail-free card. Its one-touch stress relief allows *Full Auto*'s exuberant silliness to be revelled in without fear or favour; it lets the game have its cake, and the player eat it.

It's not that Pseudo Interactive (author of *Cel Damage* and the XNA car-crash demo, two projects seemingly spot-welded together here) hasn't made an effort to vary *Full Auto*'s diet. There's an extensive career mode, and the three classes of straight combat racing that gradually increase the speed and decrease the armour of the cars on offer are only the start of it. The decision to preselect a specific car and weapon set for each event is a wise one, but the successive variations on a theme – focusing on the elimination of rivals, forcing the use of underpowered cars, team racing and so on – largely fail to bring any substantive changes to it. There is one exception (not counting the wholly unremarkable unarmed race and time trial modes): Rampage, a traffic-elimination round with no opponents



The docklands tracks – short circuits featuring multiple shortcuts through warehouses and wide aprons of open tarmac – are by far the most original in the game, and also some of the best. For the rest, think *Burnout* lite

but the clock and a kill counter, requiring a surprisingly fine balance to be found between speed and destruction. It's arguably been weighted too much towards fast driving and away from the base satisfaction of shredding traffic jams with heavy ordnance, but it does twist the game into an intriguing new shape, and there's not enough of it.

As different as it is, Rampage mode still encapsulates *Full Auto*'s main flaw. By ultimately choosing to watch the clock rather than the carnage, and craft a racing game first and foremost, Pseudo may have avoided the formlessness that afflicts so much vehicular combat, but it has failed to play to its game's strengths. The greasy, weightless, unmodulated handling and largely unimaginative course design aren't remotely as gratifying as the raw, explosive scraps between racers. Combat is simple but balanced, with weapon sets that offer genuine variety, a heat gauge to prevent overuse, relatively robust and location-specific armour making kills a matter of persistence and good timing, and the



The boost system is so reminiscent of *Burnout* that you may find yourself fruitlessly trying to charge your meter with near misses and driving on the wrong side of the road. Of course, it's better to blast through civilians to up your wreck points and your medal-earning potential

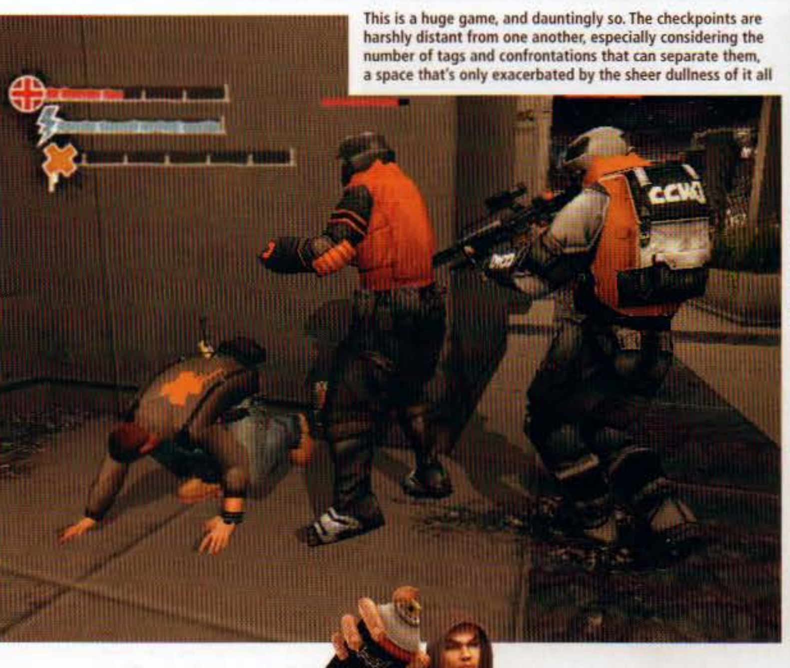
trade between front and rear weapons leading to some tense, weaving standoffs.

It's true that aiming and firing the front weapons with the right stick is a heavily compromised (if optional) control scheme, and there aren't enough clear opportunities to use the extensively destructible roadside furniture to your advantage. But these rhythmic, ballistic grudge matches make a welcome change from banana skins and homing missiles. A more imaginative focus on them – in multiplayer especially – might have helped *Full Auto* emerge from the looming shadow of its idol, *Burnout*, and become just a little more than the disposable, retrograde indulgence that it is. **[6]**

Gunning the engine



***Full Auto*'s weapon sets aren't as blunt as they seem, as they balance out on at least two levels: strength in the front versus the rear, and firepower versus range or firing speed. Fixed, long-range machine guns come with a slow, easily dodged mine layer behind; the short-range shotgun is trickier but more powerful, can be aimed sideways, and is partnered with rearward volleys of bouncing, scattering grenades. Twin bonnet-mounted weapons leave the rear dangerously exposed but can maintain almost constant forward fire. Multiplayer would be far duller without this scrupulously even-handed element of choice, and it's a terrible shame the full range remains locked away behind a long slog through career mode.**



This is a huge game, and dauntingly so. The checkpoints are harshly distant from one another, especially considering the number of tags and confrontations that can separate them, a space that's only exacerbated by the sheer dullness of it all



While the game makes some attempt to justify the trail of violence left in Trane's wake – New Radius City is policed by the warlike CCK police force, and its service-industry staffers are willing yobs – it feels more like bullying than rebellion





Claiming major graffiti spots results in a quantity of rep – essential for opening the game's many unlockables – with the player rated on speed, size, location and any drips incurred by using too much paint. The trickiest part in all this, however, is spotting which part of the tag hasn't been quite filled out as you near completion

MARC ECKO'S GETTING UP: CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: FEBRUARY 17 PUBLISHER: ATARI
DEVELOPER: THE COLLECTIVE PREVIOUSLY IN: E150, E156

Despite the urban overkill that has been trying its best to rob videogaming of its identity of late, there's still room for something like *Getting Up*. Something *like* it, that is, as the finished production hasn't lived up to the talk that was talked. A thirdperson combat adventure featuring some high-rise clambering and a treatment of graffiti as more than just a minigame, and from the developer behind the enjoyable, if overstretched, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Getting Up* isn't so much broken, which is perhaps what you were expecting, but simply drab.

As lead character Trane pushes his way up through the underbelly of New Radius City, a near-future metropolis with some crisp nighttime skylines, his tags-to-riches endeavour is focused mainly on graffiti – but it's this core element that feels all too throwaway. Trane finds a prescripted tag spot, chooses the size and style of the piece from his black book, and then applies it using the analogue stick to fill up the template as evenly and quickly as possible. It's hardly frustrating, although it could be smoother, but is a technique that dulls in record time, reduced to nothing but the colouring in of a rectangle, over and over. Similarly, Trane can collect the tags of graffiti legends scattered around each of the many levels; each is marked by a small camera icon on the floor, and recorded with a single button press. And the 'freeform' subquests – time-based objectives that deliver bonus rep – are often nothing but a mad dash to plaster surfaces with Trane's secondary graffiti skills, tags that, again, involve nothing but a button press.

Some tags are admittedly handsome, but their application is just uninvolved, next to the line-tracing nerve test of tagging presented in *The Warriors* or even the analogue stick trickery of *Jet Set Radio*.

Combat, too, feels like it's missing flesh, and plays without any real sense of crunch and chaos. And, if there aren't any weapons to hand, scraps drag on for far too long – a fact that, like the dreary graffiti mechanic, is rammed home by some vicious checkpoints and made unavoidable by aggressive enemies that force the player into fights.

Stealth, action and acrobatics (see 'Trane's tracks'), played out via some slow-moving exploration of urban environments that never see daylight – the possibility of this all coming together in a more flexible and engaging manner is still a welcome one. But, for a game based on a culture of reputation, craftsmanship and leaving a mark, *Getting Up* is one that'll pass by largely unnoticed. **[4]**



You know you're in for an unsatisfying stealth experience when your pursuers give up the moment you leave their eye level and climb on top of a nearby truck. The city's CCK troopers can, however, become a true irritation later in the game, especially when guns get involved

Trane's tracks

Trane's bid to own New Radius City will often take him to some elevated places – heaven spots – that see him wall-jumping between ledges and scaling drainpipes. This portion of the game feels mostly linear, and more about moving between areas rather than true exploration. There's a useful camera switch that offers a firstperson glance before making a perilous jump, but Trane's movements can still feel somewhat sticky in practice. While there's also a firstperson 'intuition' cam – a neat but perhaps unnecessary touch that makes graffiti spots leap out at you – some of the fixed perspectives enforced while applying a tag can become an obstacle, making it unnecessarily awkward to see just what part of a design remains unpainted.



It may not be as spectacularly detailed and authentic as *PGR3*'s in-car view, but *Race Driver 3*'s equivalent still gives an evocative, exciting perspective on the track. In this game, though, sideways glances will be used less for sightseeing than for keeping tabs on dangerous opponents



TOCA RACE DRIVER 3

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £30
RELEASE: FEBRUARY 24 PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E157

The conceit of this generation of *TOCA* games has been to spice up their mid-level motorsport with narrative interludes. It's been a clumsy effort to dress up a traditionally dry format, and this time around, Codemasters has restricted cutscenes to short, well-produced snippets of advice, encouragement and information, addressed to camera by a forthright Scottish minder. It's as if it has recognised what every motor racing fan already knew: that the best stories are always told on the track. And *TOCA Race Driver 3* could well be the very best game at telling them.

With fields of six or eight cars versus *TOCA*'s 20, with less combative AI drivers, and with their structural focus on outright wins, *TOCA*'s rivals – the street-legal showrooms of *Gotham*, *Forza* and *Gran Turismo* – just can't do the drama and spirit of track competition as well. They may surpass it elsewhere, but *Race Driver 3* understands that a processional win from pole is less fulfilling than a hard-fought, championship-saving fifth place from the back of the grid. And though it can't exactly engineer those situations, it does everything in its power to make them more likely, and leave them unpunished.

To that end, the track is thronged with cars that race each other as well as you, and qualification – optional in the main World Tour mode – is relatively tough. Big crashes and off-track excursions are costly, especially with the detailed new damage modelling, and some slightly overzealous marshalling. But midfield racers are easy meat for a determined driver, so some kind of recovery is always possible if your car isn't a write-off, and progress requirements are usually quite modest (third or fourth place in a championship). The greatest danger to a thrilling, nail-biting experience is your own perfectionism, given the inclusion – wise, but definitely double-edged – of an instant restart option.

Race Driver 3 steers a course between authenticity and accessibility with an impressively sure touch, but its true feat is to do so while claiming the title of ultimate motor racing polymath. By limiting the selection of vehicles in most classes to one or two, the game is able to feature an esoteric selection of rally, historic, dirt track, truck, go-kart and oval events, as well as comprehensive GT, touring car and open-wheel series. All this across an authoritative selection of circuits, with the option to explore each class in extreme race-rules detail in the vast Pro Career mode, or dot around the menu in World Tour. Every level, era and school of four-wheel motorsport is represented: a monumental achievement.

The handling, somewhat detached on the default setting but intensely involving in pro-simulation mode, copes better with some formulae than others, and the difficulty balancing is off at the extremes of the game's range. Yet *Race Driver 3* is still master of at least half of its trades. Amid this generosity, that is more than could have been expected, and enough to place it among the best pure motorsport titles on consoles. **[8]**



Race Driver 3's huge track library is a compelling draw. The ubiquitous Laguna Seca is joined by highly technical modern F1 circuits (Shanghai and Bahrain) and some guts-or-glory classics (Spa and Brands Hatch), but it's the more obscure selections that will really surprise and delight racers







The Australian V8 Supercar series sees the game's most charged racing, thanks to aggressive opponents, big, powerful cars and fast bends. It's also an excuse to include a range of unfamiliar and treacherous circuits

Dirt-track racing is the most unusual discipline, as well as the toughest to get to grips with. It's hard to say if that's down to poor difficulty balancing, the radically different and unfamiliar driving technique, or the wildly divergent vehicles (from buggies to monster trucks)

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With *Race Driver 3*, Codemasters' taste for leaving no cashflow, sponsorship or branding opportunity unexploited is taken to new heights. As well as selling cheat codes over the telephone as usual, the company has sealed a promotional tie-in with Honda which sees a special all-Honda championship series – including lawnmowers, ATVs and an 'exclusive' chance to test drive the new 2006 Civic – unlocked by visiting the manufacturer's website. There's also a corporate time-trial event, the Palmer Motorsport Sensation, complete with sales blurb. All of which is perfectly in tune with the mercenary world of motorsport. (Oddly, amid this cross-marketing frenzy, the game's TOCA licence is now irrelevant to its content – the game's star series are DTM and the incredibly butch Australian V8 Supercars.)



24: THE GAME

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: MARCH 14
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: STUDIO CAMBRIDGE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E159



LA story



It might not be the most enviable endorsement, but the cutscenes that Cambridge and its collaborators have assembled contain enough 24 to make the *The Game* part seem incidental. The story they regularly impart is every bit as inconceivable as that of the show itself, and its timing when dropping melodramatic bombshells is entirely consistent. The dead eyes of the character models can be an unpleasant distraction, but the accompanying vocal work is good enough to compensate. To discuss the plot would be to spoil some enjoyable (if predictable) twists, so we'll offer some key words and phrases instead: assassins, disaster, siege, insider, conspiracy, bomb, and "They've got Kim."

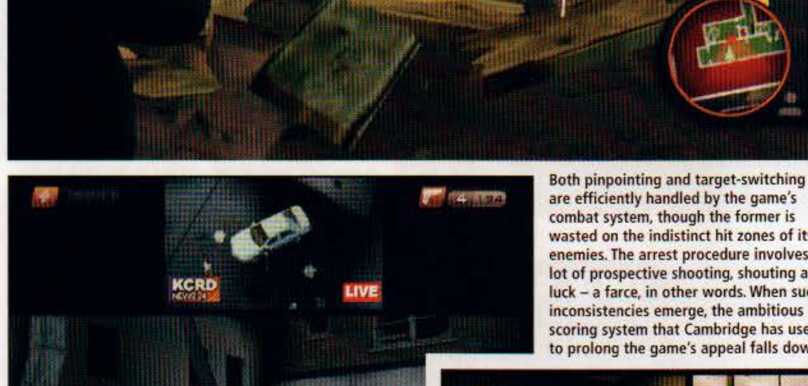
Studio Cambridge's 24 adaptation has one approach to its inherently demanding commission: play it safe, use those famous clock strokes as a motif rather than a game device and leave the clever stuff to the cutscenes and series writer Duppy Demetrius. Perhaps that's marginally unfair – we made a big deal of certain novelties last issue and they haven't become stale since. But with design lifts from here, there and everywhere peppered throughout (*Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* being quite unashamedly ripped off), it's safe to say that the developer has rather appropriately played things by the numbers.

It hasn't done a bad job when you consider that the furious chronology of the average Bauer day is quite faithfully conveyed by the game's 100 levels. But *24* is no marathon. A great many of those stages are mere flavour – fleeting mind and reflex challenges that do little beyond illustrating the game's story with requisite hi-tech fluff. The theory seems to be that the average veteran of television's 24 remembers a given number of series moments rather than the whole. Through sheer force of suggestion, then, Cambridge believes it can pass off an eventful 12-hour videogame as something twice as long – a decision we should applaud for sparing us the endurance test that would have resulted otherwise.

The game is overstretched beyond doubt. Despite having placed its capably modelled player characters behind the wheels of many cars, the triggers of many guns, the controls of many gadgets and into other assorted dramas, it provides little that's either independent of novelty appeal or wholly successful. Its salvations are the consistency with which that novelty is supplied and the elegant, skilfully penned cinematics that fall in between (see 'LA story'). A thirdperson targeting system that works considerably better than most, a reliable camera with drunken cinematic sway and a broadcast-quality audio mix are the mainstays of an experience that's otherwise hit and miss. Stealth missions are surprisingly enjoyable, as are gunfights; interrogations remain excellent in spite of their simplicity, and the visual fidelity is universally crisp.

But the game lets itself down with many a hallmark of over-ambition: the ropey announcement mechanic is a complete waste of space that's greeted by deserved AI apathy, difficulty spikes subject Bauer to an occasional Groundhog Day from hell, and bog-standard vocal work for enemy grunts sticks a thorn in the game's narrative side. As much, if not more, of what makes *24* a title worth playing through to the end can be attributed to the contributions of TV series talent as it can to the game's developer. Hardly a quality that discerning gamers should be looking for, you'd think, but in the peculiar world of adaptations such as these it might actually be. The game succeeds at being a credible entry in Jack Bauer's diary, and perhaps that precluded it being a particularly incredible game. **[6]**

Both pinpointing and target-switching are efficiently handled by the game's combat system, though the former is wasted on the indistinct hit zones of its enemies. The arrest procedure involves a lot of prospective shooting, shouting and luck – a farce, in other words. When such inconsistencies emerge, the ambitious scoring system that Cambridge has used to prolong the game's appeal falls down

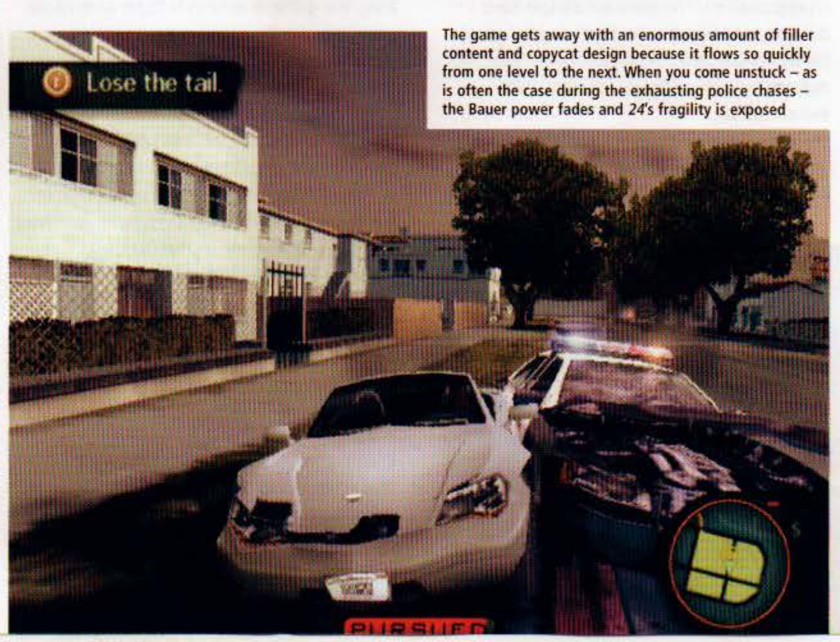


The interesting turns taken by the game's use of splitscreen go some way to alleviating the sense of repetition that builds throughout the day. Rarely does it transform your approach to a given task, however – an opportunity it's sad to see missed









The game gets away with an enormous amount of filler content and copycat design because it flows so quickly from one level to the next. When you come unstuck – as is often the case during the exhausting police chases – the Bauer power fades and *24*'s fragility is exposed



Beneath all the badness, there's still room for a nice touch – the soundtrack isn't persistent, but piped in through a series of boomboxes scattered throughout each stage, which can be used to cycle through the game's selection of licensed hip-hop



The game takes in the lives of three people: Freeze the reluctant gangster, detective Lester Williams and gang leader Shaun Calderon. The first and last of these can take hostages, which help extend the life bar a little, simply because *25 To Life*'s police force is just as keen to shoot them up as you



25 TO LIFE

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED)
PRICE: $40 (£22) RELEASE: NOW (US), SPRING (UK)
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: AVALANCHE SOFTWARE

This is it, hopefully. Many have asked a rhetorical question over the past year – just how long will it be until we see the end of the stream of cynical-seeming crime-culture games that traipse along in the *GTA* wake? This, hopefully, will be the last straw. It certainly should be. All too quickly following Konami's dire *Crime Life: Gang Wars* and 50 Cent's attempt to release the most expensive album ever in the form of *Bulletproof*, it's beginning to feel like a crime wave of bad criminals in criminally bad games. *Please* let this be the end of it.

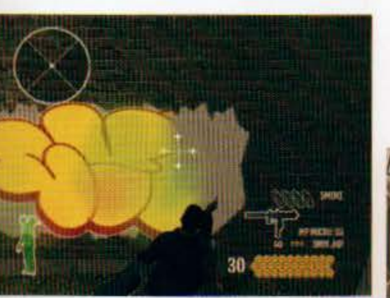
Regardless of its chosen veneer, there's a dreadful thirdperson shooter beneath that skin of mainstream gangster braggadocio. Despite a handful of basic shooter tools – crouched movement, a corner lean, a slight zoom, a radar, the ability to fire before reloading is complete – its shootouts never feel like anything more than a messy farce, where the employment of accuracy and skill are tertiary concerns. And that's the entire game, a procession of gunfights with little or no satisfaction to be had, and no sense of feedback or precision, backed up by some headless AI. But, at the very least, it does feel light on glitches when compared to something like *Bulletproof*.



The HUD is basic, ugly and obtrusive, with an aiming reticule that's inexplicably large. The radar would be of some use if the lean function created a tactic that wouldn't result in the player losing chunks of their energy at every confrontation

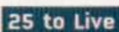
Not that your opponents – identikit waves of cops or gangsters – have much to work with in the game's angular, cardboard environments. It's a simple-looking game, although there's often plenty of furniture scattered throughout the levels. Its action is giddy to the point of being near unplayable, the player's energy bar chipped away by bullets from all angles from speedily strafing enemies whose only skill is to be able to put umpteen rounds into the player from whatever distance, with no response other than a slight blood splatter to signify a successful hit on an assailant. Shotguns and rifles do offer superior firepower, but the game is saved from shoddy, blunt unfairness by the medikits that can be found in every other corner of each stage.

Mindless violence doesn't have to lead a mindless videogame, as Criterion's *Black* so ably demonstrates this month. Not too long ago, it seemed that every publisher had to have a bit of gangster in its portfolio; it's no surprise, really, that they've turned out to be such troublemakers. But if there's one thing that *25 To Life* gets to do right, let it bring an end to this destructive preoccupation with the cross-media lure of gritty, crime-flavoured urban violence, and the unacceptably low standards it so often brings with it. **[2]**



Each stage features a number of secondary objectives – achieve a certain accuracy percentage, defeat 60 enemies and so on – which unlock multiplayer features upon meeting their conditions. The spraying of graffiti tags is present and correct, too, with a suitably clumsy implementation





25 to Live

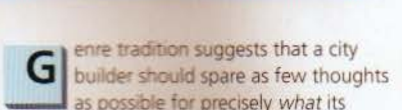


The game's online mode makes a surprisingly hearty stab at multiplayer, at least in its suite of options. Multiple game types, with crime-themed names spun off from traditional deathmatch modes, are offered, along with an elaborate custom avatar tool. While it's buoyed by the simple fact that *any* multiplayer offering can make a game more enjoyable simply by the addition of real opponents and allies, the base gunplay at work beneath it all makes it feel pointless, when so many games do the same thing so much better.



TYCOON CITY: NEW YORK

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 24
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: DEEP RED
PREVIOUSLY IN: E157



Genre tradition suggests that a city builder should spare as few thoughts as possible for precisely *what* its players might create, instead providing the tools, workspace, materials and rules that will make the act itself a challenge and a pleasure. But *Tycoon City*'s desire to create a believable Big Apple has become an obsession, focusing on that end rather than the means of getting there. Where its peers extol freedom, this game calls the shots.

Its portrayal of New York is so pre-baked that it deprives you of almost every expressive outlet you expect (you can't even name your businesses), and its attempts at compensation aren't so much inadequate as mildly insulting. Buildings must be placed so as to make optimum use of each other's spheres of influence, and each bears a number of customisable tiles for decoration, advertising or facilities that maximise its worth. We use the term customisation reluctantly, however, because once an innate knowledge of urban design and aesthetics is applied to each restrictive grid, the results look near-identical. Parks represent larger canvases, but still offer little to encourage economic strategy or artistic thought.

The impression you get is that you've been employed as an architect but handed the post of a labourer. Beyond this, the game instils in you the disquieting notion that you must have completely missed its point. *Tycoon* games are, after all, business simulators at heart, but *Tycoon City* feels equally unrewarding when approached as one. You assemble your financial base at the outset – a neat cluster of services and domiciles clipped Lego-like into complementary formations – and then you're away. Subsequent progress is inexorable, slave to a pattern of spend and recoup that the enthusiastically presented, poorly staggered objectives have trouble justifying.

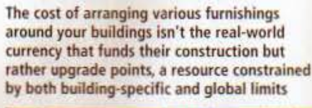
Much of the problem is that a valiant attempt to model the desires and movements of a New York population has conjured an array of volatile statistics. Graphs stack up to tell you who needs what, but rarely do their movements stabilise into reliable trends. It's a remarkable exercise in the suggestion of scale, but rather than run together into informative systems, its abundant details run amok. And the effects are severe: disorientation at first, then disillusionment, and finally a trance-like state of automated play that few will willingly endure. The game runs smoothly on midrange systems, scales its visual detail gracefully and boasts an intuitive mouse-driven interface, but its core mechanics are something of a mess.

Tycoon City has defied our optimism despite its heart and personality. It's all too possible to walk robotised through its challenge and almost impossible to care. Just as it likes to dictate its players' paths, it seems to have shackled itself to an ill-advised concept with little hope of escape. Its vibrant, beguiling version of NYC is a symptom of that ill: a great place to visit, but hell to piece together. **[5]**

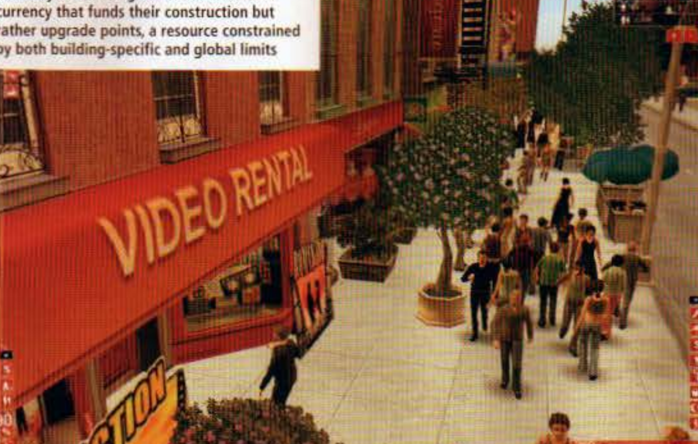
Tycoon City, Tycoon City



***Tycoon City*'s a difficult game to get on with, but its characters, dialogue and in-game cinematics try their very best to mend the relationship. It's a shame that few reasons exist to descend to its street-level (play is simply easier from above) because the ambient effects and incidental comments of passers-by bring a great deal more life to the environment than you otherwise hear. In terms of character, the game hits the same lofty heights as Atari's genre classic, *Rollercoaster Tycoon III*. Admittedly, the various quips and complaints become repetitive after a while in a single district, but as the game methodically opens itself up to New York's full range of regional flavours, the effort that's been put into its presentation becomes increasingly apparent.**

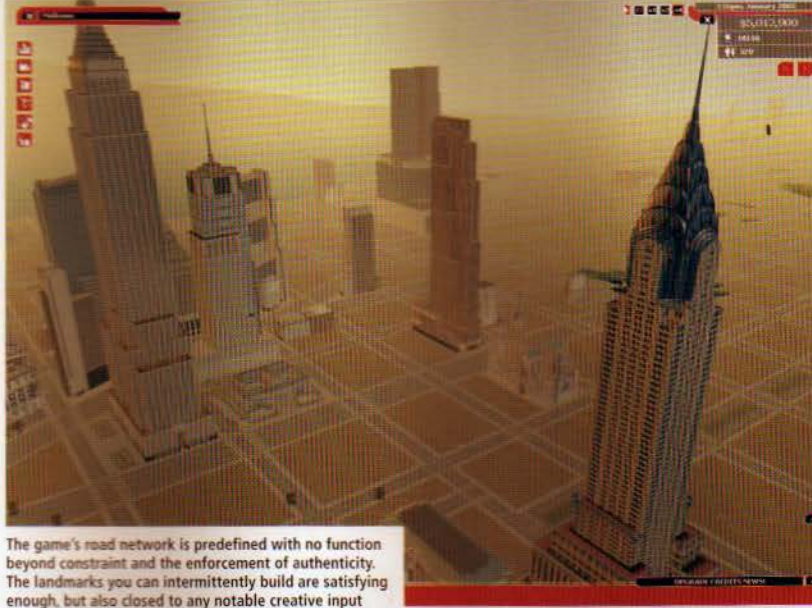


The cost of arranging various furnishings around your buildings isn't the real-world currency that funds their construction but rather upgrade points, a resource constrained by both building-specific and global limits









The game's road network is predefined with no function beyond constraint and the enforcement of authenticity. The landmarks you can intermittently build are satisfying enough, but also closed to any notable creative input







As much as the limited number of available upgrade tiles exacerbates customisation issues, the concession – to allow potentially ill-suited objects to be placed on roofs as well as forecourts – feels as ridiculous as it is curative



THE PLAN

FORMAT: PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £30
RELEASE: FEBRUARY 24 PUBLISHER: GHOSTLIGHT
DEVELOPER: EKO SYSTEM

Bad artists copy, great artists steal. And you could argue that *The Plan*, a game about art crime of an entirely literal sort, either brazenly copies or cleverly steals from the likes of *Hitman*, *Splinter Cell* and (if you were in a mischievous mood) *Bonanza Bros*.

However, the game's central idea – three screens, three controllable characters; a cooperative mode where friends are optional – is all its own. Early on, one character clings to the outside of a train while another distracts a watching guard, leading to the amusing sight of a pair of disembodied legs shuffling past the window on the latter character's screen. This is more than a visual gag: what *The Plan* is doing is transferring one of film's oldest tricks – the crosscut between simultaneous slices of action – to videogames.

Eko repeatedly uses its three windows on the world to make interactive entertainment out of setpieces Hollywood usually gets to keep for itself. It's goosebump stuff to mock-surrender to a guard with one of your team while another moves in for the kill from behind. Ironically, *The Plan* out-24s 24 in the same month the official TV tie-in arrives.

Unfortunately, like the similar (but less ambitious) *Without Warning*, *The Plan* has bitten off more than it can chew. For every clever one-screen-two-screen punch there's a depressingly traditional multi-character moment – like switches designed for two sets of hands. Guards and civilians are simply broken, reacting with jarring idiocy – or dumb inaction – to your suspicious behaviour. Chatting away about hair colour isn't a convincing way of distracting the trained guards of Prague's National Gallery while your colleague picks a lock, but you're expected to be convinced anyway. Five times in one level.

Eko's imagination and flair makes it quite possible to enjoy *The Plan* in spite of the incompetence and bumbling. Gadgets are clever, for one thing. And the game's Ocean's Eleven-esque crooks might be laughable caricatures and appallingly voice-acted, but the mental investment needed to keep on top of the three-screen heists means you couldn't be drawn closer to your team of Brad Pitt lookalikes and purring femmes fatales.

But despite *The Plan*'s charms, it will prove, for most, too shoddy a piece of engineering to be fully forgiven. Bad artists may copy, but only the worst fail to fix their AI. **[4]**



It's possible to pick the pockets of almost anyone in view, via a strange minigame where the aim is to match the position of your ghostly hand with the figure of your oblivious target. Anyone familiar with wobbly-handed darts games from the ZX Spectrum days will feel right at home



Many of *The Plan*'s cleverest moments are also its most bewildering, such as using one character's night-vision goggles to guide a second past touch-sensitive floor alarms. It begs an obvious question: why not simply hand the goggles over?







LEMMINGS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 24
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: TEAM 17
PREVIOUSLY IN: E157





The level editor offers all the tools you need to cobble together new puzzles, but the blocky nature of the maps you can make here places a harsh limit on what you can artistically achieve

It seems a no-brainer that *Lemmings* should port well to a widescreen handheld. Its levels are primarily landscape, its time limits are efficiently strict and it's famed for concentrating abundant charm into tiny packages. So how, when it gets underway on such a cheerful note, does this version end up feeling tired just a few hours later? Does Team 17's conversion stick to the original format a little too closely? Or is the *Lemmings* design actually more delicate than it may have seemed?

It's soon clear that the concerns raised by the preview code are inconsequential in practice: the assign-while-paused workaround does not prove ruinous. Instead, the question becomes why the game gets so little mileage out of seemingly valuable generosities such as a new level editor (which, it's disappointing to report, isn't particularly intuitive or efficient anyhow) and support for online sharing and downloads.

It's perhaps because the crucial balance of immersion and immediacy which made the original a classic has been lost during the switch from monitor and mouse to small screen and nub. The portability that saw the game through its tour of every major format during the '90s has finally failed the test of time, and it's the trawl of the cursor between one lemming and the next that does this interpretation the most damage.

The notion of games from the 16bit console era on PSP isn't anachronistic – *Mercury* integrated the sentiment well enough into much of its frontend alone – and Team 17 has in no way made a lazy update. *Lemmings* is a subtle mix of old and new that feels like a natural convergence of DMA's title with its adopted developer's own *Worms*. It's authentically chirpy, especially in terms of audio, and overall it feels honest and enthusiastic rather than cynical or efficient. For many, though, the problem will be over-familiarity, something that, over the years, has turned the chime of 'Let's go!' into a rather more muted 'Let's not'. **[6]**

SEGA RALLY 2006

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£33)
RELEASE: NOW (JPN), TBA (US/UK) PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Coming after the Xbox and arcade rebirth of *OutRun*, *Sega Rally 2006* feels utterly underwhelming. Cars look tired and faded, the dullest that classic rally vehicles have looked for quite some time, and exhaust pipes backfire in a manner that sounds like a death rattle, while the tracks' most prominent characteristic is pop-up, and they feel devoid of any interesting curves. To begin with, it's almost a shock, a genuine fall from grace. Does one of history's greatest arcade racers deserve such a lacking update?

But, of course, this is a Sega driving game and any initial misgivings are supposed to melt away under the heat of a subtly tuned experience centred on enjoyable unreality. Which they do, partially – the cars are floaty, even more so than in the original, and there's little need for traditional driving lines or, indeed, considerate braking. Slides barely feel like they're digging in, but the overall speediness means the game has something unique to offer in its incredibly short stages. Several hundred of them are packed into *Sega Rally 2006*, plenty of which feel interchangeable, but their brief, drag-strip-style nature allows them to be memorised quickly, and lets the player begin shaving time off their runs in a far more immediate manner than a typical rally game.


The dusky African stages – one of a handful of generic themes – come the closest to looking good. There are few courses whose curves feel anywhere near as varied as the original's

The game's career mode, featuring plentiful upgrading and tuning possibilities, requires some effort before it begins to engage, but time attack and the typical arcade mode – where players snake their way past the 14 other cars over four short tracks – are there for those who want easy-access play.

Through this, the game still has some hooks with which to snag players, even if it does feel largely unpolished. It's likeable, but feels an unworthy *Sega Rally* heir – not totally devoid of worth, but an insufficient update that's missing that essential, glorious Sega spark. It may be unique on the PS2 driving landscape, but it remains only mildly exhilarating. **[5]**



Renditions of the original *Sega Rally* courses are included. Indeed, the limited Japanese edition includes a bonus disc containing a conversion of said classic



KEY OF HEAVEN

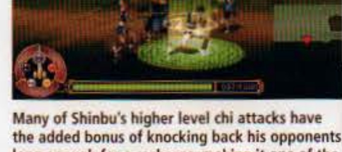
FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $30 (£35)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), 24 MARCH 2006 UK PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: CLIMAX ENTERTAINMENT PREVIOUSLY IN: E159



Key of Heaven's lush exterior – all sweeping RPG storyline and spectacular combo-based swordplay – seems unusually approachable, but underneath hides a mind-warpingly dense system of menus and options. Its fighting system hinges on slotted 'bugei' scrolls, which need to be filled in with 'kenpu', collectable tokens representing single moves which can be strung together in set sequences, or, with freestyle scrolls, at the player's whim to create their own unique and disarming dance.

It's a system of laudable subtlety and invention, but care given towards creating these limitless combinations is instantly squandered when it's discovered that these elegant sequences are fuelled by nothing grander than plain old one-button mashing. As the game progresses, fights never seem to evolve any further than a series of exploitable traded cheap shots, with a maddeningly delayed parry move ensuring that even the attack you see coming has to be endured for its first several connects before you're able to finally duck away.

Despite the pretensions of its grand cinematics and RPG-lite levelling, at its core it offers scarcely more depth than any number of arcade brawlers that came a decade before it. While on the face of it that's hardly a damning charge, placed in a free-roaming world with ineffectively denoted objectives and an almost entirely indecipherable map, it fails to offer any of the measured and deliberately paced action of its predecessors. Instead, it lets the player wander and backtrack the labyrinthine corridored countryside endlessly, pausing only for the occasional one-button scrap. If to know a man you must walk a mile in his shoes, by the game's end you'll know hero Shinbu ten times over.


Many of Shinbu's higher level chi attacks have the added bonus of knocking back his opponents long enough for a recharge, making it one of the later game's more exploitable offensive plays

Between its laissez-faire approach to combat, its underdeveloped system of rock-paper-scissors elemental magic attacks, and its oversimple levelling, *Key Of Heaven* offers none of the immediacy or impact of its handheld action-RPG brethren. Approached free of any expectations higher than endless, mindless single-button mashing, the kenpu collecting and scenery spotting can provide some limited enjoyment in smaller doses, but approached as an epic quest, *Key Of Heaven* is one better left untaken. **[4]**


Shinbu's attacks, no matter how disjointedly designed, are nonetheless attractive, though you'll rarely feel you're doing much more. There's an insurmountable feeling of disconnection between the player and the action throughout





SUPER PRINCESS PEACH

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥5,700 (£28) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

The big question with the DS was always what to do with the second screen, and even Nintendo, even on its home turf of the 2D platformer, can sometimes seem a little lost. Swaying like a slightly sinister sex doll on the lower screen is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a good look for Mushroom Kingdom royalty. It's more inviting, perhaps, of an inquisitive poke with the finger than the four hearts surrounding her, but – as you soon find out through repeated prodding – it's a futile exercise. Those hearts are the only means by which the Princess can be animated.

Each of the four hearts is essentially an extra button – a means of activating Peach's emotions. Red, for example, sees her exploding with rage and, surrounded by fire, she can burn bridges or dispatch encroaching enemies. Conversely, the blue heart will send her into floods of tears. The water can be used to make little sprouts grow (allowing her access to higher ground) and the extra running speed gained can be used to sprint over rapidly disintegrating platforms that she would otherwise be unable to traverse. The use of these powers is finite, however, and her depleting stock can only be refilled through the collection of crystals. The challenge, then, is knowing which of these unique abilities to use and when, in order to solve simple environmental puzzles with the ultimate goal of rescuing three captive Toads per stage, which is the requirement for the final showdown with Bowser.



Peach's primary attack comes from her parasol. This talking companion can be wielded like a club or used to throw enemies. It can also be upgraded, delivering new skills like a charged attack or the ability to be opened mid-jump



The captive Toads hidden in each stage are your primary motivation for replaying levels. Although finding them all is a necessity, they're rarely difficult to free inside the relatively small levels

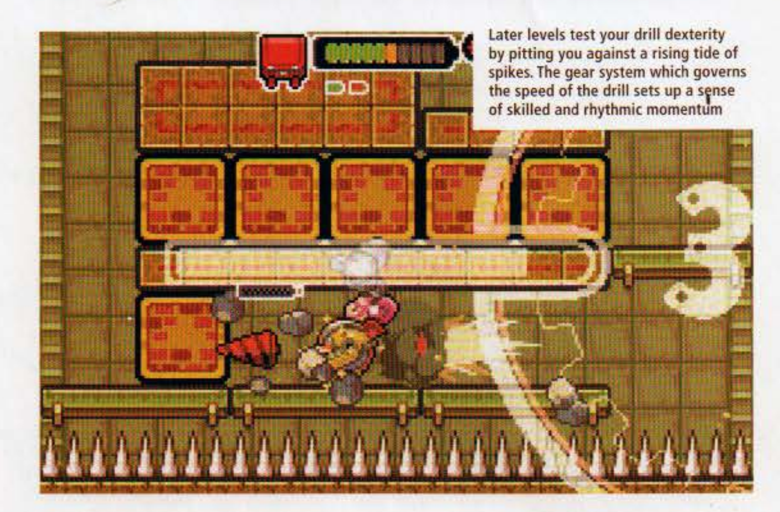
Unsurprisingly, given Nintendo's pedigree, the execution is solid and the presentation unashamedly saccharine. Reminiscent of *Yoshi's Island*, it's awash with pastel shades and, in keeping with the game's heroine, has an almost embarrassing abundance of pink. There's an unshakable air of good cheer here: Peach nonchalantly skips through hazards, the difficulty never rising above mildly taxing, and the game's hidden collectables revealing themselves with little effort.

As a result, progression is remarkably swift, allowing you to scamper from stage to stage as fluidly as *Peach*'s jaunty soundtrack. You may pause on occasion to tackle one of its more mundane, tried-and-tested platforming motifs – or perhaps sigh in dismay at the fact that, though her repertoire of skills is vast, there's rarely scope for invention. But there's certainly something to be said for such a calming, stress-free adventure – a game that goes out of its way to provide a holiday as much as it does entertainment. **[6]**



DRILL DOZER

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: $35 (£20) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), MAY 26 (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: GAME FREAK



Later levels test your drill dexterity by pitting you against a rising tide of spikes. The gear system which governs the speed of the drill sets up a sense of skilled and rhythmic momentum

The last time Game Freak made an original game it went on to sell over 100 million copies. *Drill Dozer* (known as *Screwbreaker* in Japan) may be the follow-up project to the *Pokémon* empire, but its gameplay (and, let's face it, sales potential) is considerably different.

It has as its starting point not just the idea that platform games are getting stale, but that even the platforms themselves are in need of an overhaul. Consequently, it gives its perky heroine a 'drill dozer' mech suit with which she can burrow and blast through obstacles in her way. Not that her trusty drill is limited to demolition duties: it's also your main form of attack and defence, allowing you to bore through queues of enemies and deflect the blows of the elaborate bosses which await your arrival at the end of each of the game's varied levels. And it can also be used as a form of locomotion – propelling you through threaded tunnels, powering a rotor so you can take to the skies, and giving you crucial purchase on special jelly blocks that boing you up and away to your destination. Once it's got you where you need to go, and destroyed what you need to destroy, it also plays a crucial role as a key for locked – or rather armoured – doors, and as a switch as it unscrews bank-vault tumblers and powers machinery. It's a peculiar idea to grasp, but it's impossible to argue with how successfully Game Freak has taken one simple design decision and made it integral to movement, combat and puzzle solving.

It's the sign of a confident, focused developer, and that impression is confirmed by the rest of the game. Level design is smart and entertaining, encouraging replay to sniff out secrets and bonuses. The drill system, though peculiar, is neatly exploited to provide satisfying tests of dexterity and lateral thinking, and puzzles are slight but straightforward, running no risk of bogging you down. The presentation is crisp and characterful, and the animation surprisingly charismatic. It may be from the *Pokémon* stable, but it's a game that shows flashes of design which owe something to *Metroid* and flashes of humour which owe something to Treasure. Only the slight clumsiness of combat and the faint hint of inevitability about the boss encounters weaken what is otherwise one of the GBA's better platformers, and a rare treat on an undeservedly neglected platform. **[7]**



Boss fights mostly hinge on the same dynamic – requiring you to expose a weakpoint through which you literally screw your enemy to death. A well-calibrated restart system lets you buy a second (or third, or fourth) chance should you die


PlayStation 2

TIME EXTEND

THE MARK OF KRI

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **SCEA/SONY SAN DIEGO**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE DATE: **JULY 2002**







It was touted for its combat system, but the real innovation in this ex-Disney team's action game was its treatment of the space between combat

'Gather round, all of you who would listen: I have a tale to tell'. So began *The Mark Of Kri*, as a storm of line drawings gathered to accompany the narrator's voice with illustration, equal parts Polynesian myth and Disney flair. Lines solidified into sketches, sketches into watercolours, watercolours into the flat-shaded characters and painted textures of the game, as if even the PS2's imagination had been captured by the story being told. If *Ico* had been an architect's blueprint of a platformer, *Kri* was more an animator's impression of a thirdperson action game.

Lines solidified into sketches, sketches into watercolours, watercolours into characters and painted textures as if even the PS2's imagination had been captured by the story

To that end, practically all the genre's rules – the life bar and super-attack gauge perched in a screen corner, traffic light-coded souls to harvest and redeem for a shopping list of attacks, battle prowess celebrated by a combo counter racing to double digits – went ignored, both too sorcerous and too mundane for its barbarian hero. That hero was Rau: barrel-chested, limbs like tree trunks, wordless other than bellowed war cries, taking the strong-and-silent archetype to an extreme only possible in legend and videogames. However exaggerated, his actions were ponderous and natural, leaving the mysticism to his avian spirit guide Kuzo. A literally eagle-eyed scout, Kuzo could be sent on ahead to provide advance warning of enemy positions – one of two observers







No less satisfying for its understatement, Rau's bow allows unarmoured enemies to be executed from a distance with a single careful shot, or brought down with three if desperation precludes measuring up the fatal arc. Armoured archers perched on unassailable cover are the most dangerous enemies in the game

accompanying Rau on his travels. The other was the player, as the tale of Rau's progress was only slightly less preordained than Dirk the Daring's in distant predecessor *Dragon's Lair*. With no place in the retelling for fumbled jumping puzzles or backtracking in search of some door-opening relic, interaction was limited to pressing him deliberately on down the path of most resistance. So reduced, it becomes a study in premeditated, methodical violence – a sensation later to be reprised by *Manhunt*, though *Kri* asks the player to surrender to it with no moral queasiness. Much of the game's thrill isn't drawn from combat itself, but from the prelude to it: the Juno Reactor soundscape dropping to a primal murmur, the 'focus beam' targeting system snaking outwards in an angry red heatwave and low-frequency hum. Even stealth is transformed by its use as an entirely aggressive posture: an executioner's tread in place of apprehension.

When Rau finally explodes in man-on-many battle, it plays out as a subverted boss encounter in which he's the boss, dismembering opponents with passing, almost accidental ease. It's savagery as characterisation, not gratuitous violence, even if the gawking slow-motion that frames fatal blows



suggests the latter – but the shock effect is just as relevant to his in-game audience. When one of their companions is butchered, enemies are briefly cowed into hesitation, giving Rau the chance to switch weapons, targets, or find better ground. Battles turn on choosing the right moment to make a grisly example of an enemy, then using the shocked calm – again, the prelude to the kill – to lunge for the next before they recover.

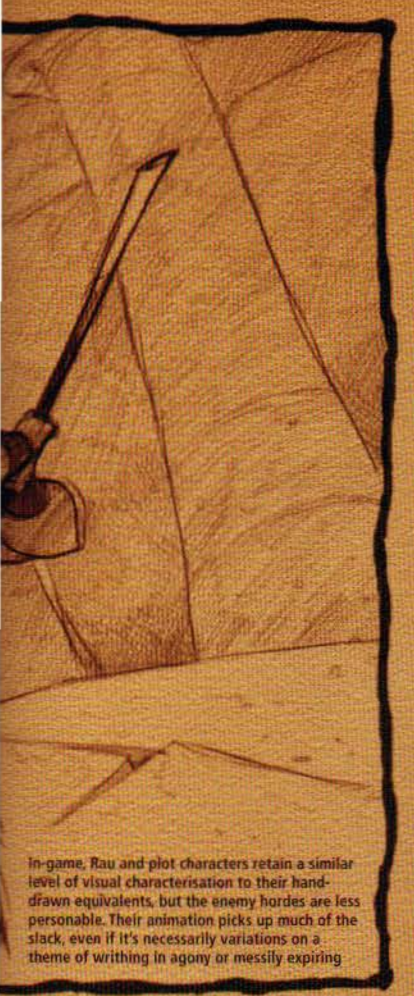
Some felt this mercilessness to be at odds with the cartoon stylings, but just as the visual treatment was larger-than-life enough to express legend, it allowed the gameworld to be painted in simple, singleminded strokes. Rau is a force of necessary good, and his enemies are simply obstacles until left lifeless in his trail by the most brutally efficient means possible. Stealth is similarly binary, as once Rau has been seen, he cannot creep back around a corner and become unseen – only grimly draw his weapon as the call to arms sounds, and see who will be the last standing. Surprisingly, a bungled sneak attack seldom spells disaster, provided players can adjust from the rhythm of dispassionate assassination to furious battle ahead of *Kri*'s otherwise regular schedule.

When Rau finally explodes in man-on-many battle, it plays out as a subverted boss encounter in which he's the boss, dismembering opponents with ease

Perhaps tardily, it takes the first two of *Kri*'s six levels to truly appreciate that schedule, and settle in to Rau's path-clearing stride. For some players, it comes in the mist and lonel birdsong of Heiadoku Forest, timing Rau's swings so as not to bury them in the sides of ancient trees; for others, reclaiming the fallen fortress of Vaitaku, picking archers off battlements through the snow haze and leaving throttled samurai sprawled in the drifts. After that, Rau's newly gifted ceremonial spear receives its blooding six foes at a time in the rainswept ruins of volcanic Meifiti – and then the tale ends on another precursor to *Manhunt*, with a shift from predatory stalking to sheer bloodlust. In a frontal assault on an



Between levels, *Kri* attempts a more natural, flowing frontend within Rau's home, an inn that becomes progressively more bustling with life and side conversations as the game progresses. It's marred slightly by the PS2's protracted loading times, though



In-game, Rau and plot characters retain a similar level of visual characterisation to their hand-drawn equivalents, but the enemy hordes are less personable. Their animation picks up much of the slack, even if it's necessarily variations on a theme of writhing in agony or messily expiring



undead army immune to surprise, other than the surprise of being split in two by Rau's battleaxe, there's no call for stealth. After finally accessing the game's full complement of weapons, it becomes a liability to use anything but that axe. And after trusting Kuzo's eyes for so long, he's left to circle unused for the majority of this final onslaught.

By positioning it as the grand finale, though, it becomes a guilty pleasure, an opportunity to shrug off the self-control and deliberateness of what's gone before. It's only when the game continues outside the story, in a series of free-for-all arena battles, that it becomes apparent how much the release of *Kri*'s violence relied on the build-up before it. The combat system is far shallower than the designers would like to believe, and when its rage is relieved of context beyond kill count and time attack, it's just a game-of-the-film, a merchandising tie-in to the feature event. Here, *Kri* could have been stronger by not trying to provide the unlockable extras expected of an action game, and instead spreading the richness further across the tale it had to tell. While the bleaker locales of its second half are an intentional contrast to the opening's overgrown splendour, they're also noticeably emptier – and more prone to the technical glitches that chip the art design's paint throughout. *Kri* doesn't lack polish so much as finish, dropping it just short of the cohesion – though not the conviction – of its generation's art-school iconoclasts, and making it all the easier for it to go unsung for its failings as a videogame rather than its accomplishments as an experience.

But for those who would listen, and watch, and feel, it's as much a companion piece to *Ico* as anything the PS2 has seen since that title, prioritising its singular mood over conforming to demands of gameplay breadth, length or immediate replayability. *God Of War* may have proven that SCEA's developers could shoulder up to Japanese mechanics, but *Mark Of Kri* showed it could match their detail of the heart as well. That's a tale, intertwined with Rau's, worth passing on to the next generation.





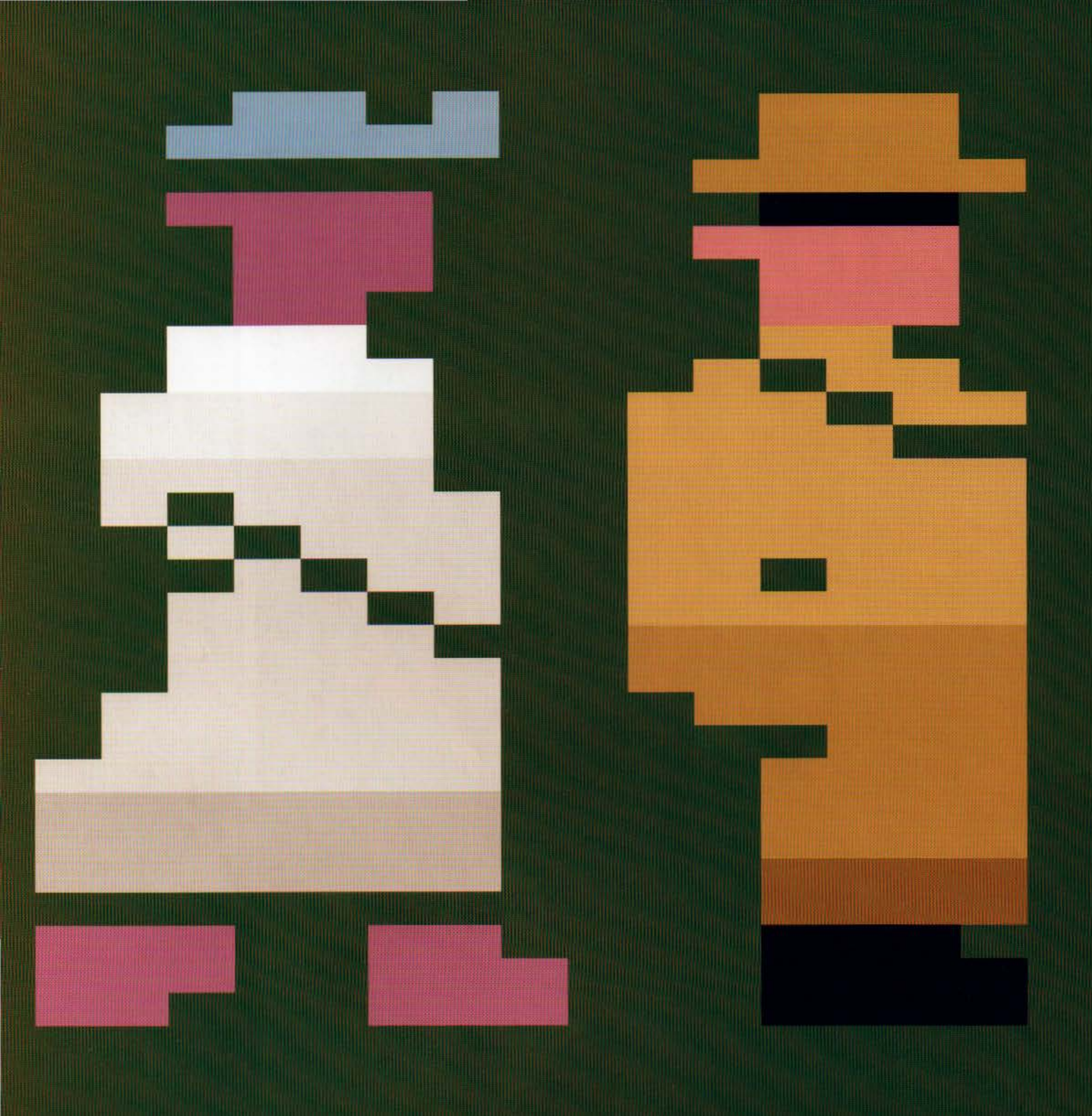
While focusing on one opponent at a time is the most efficient tactic, it's useful to use multiple targets as a means of quickly moving around the battle – attacking a distant target will lunge Rau towards them far faster than he can cover ground normally



KRI AND THE FAMILY MARK

The events of *Kri* close with an appropriately mortal finality, but the overarching legend all but demands Rau's return – a return that would be made in US-only 2005 release *Rise Of The Kasai*. Passing the legend on to Rau's younger sister Tati (below), *Kasai* unfortunately suffered from being obviously unfinished in all but its animated presentation. The inclusion of more traditional action elements such as boss fights and switch hunts was ill judged, downplaying the game's strengths while failing to widen its appeal. Teasingly, it concludes with far less closure than *Kri*, prophesying Tati's rise to become queen of the series' savage empire: but the muted reception of both titles may leave the details of that story unrecorded.





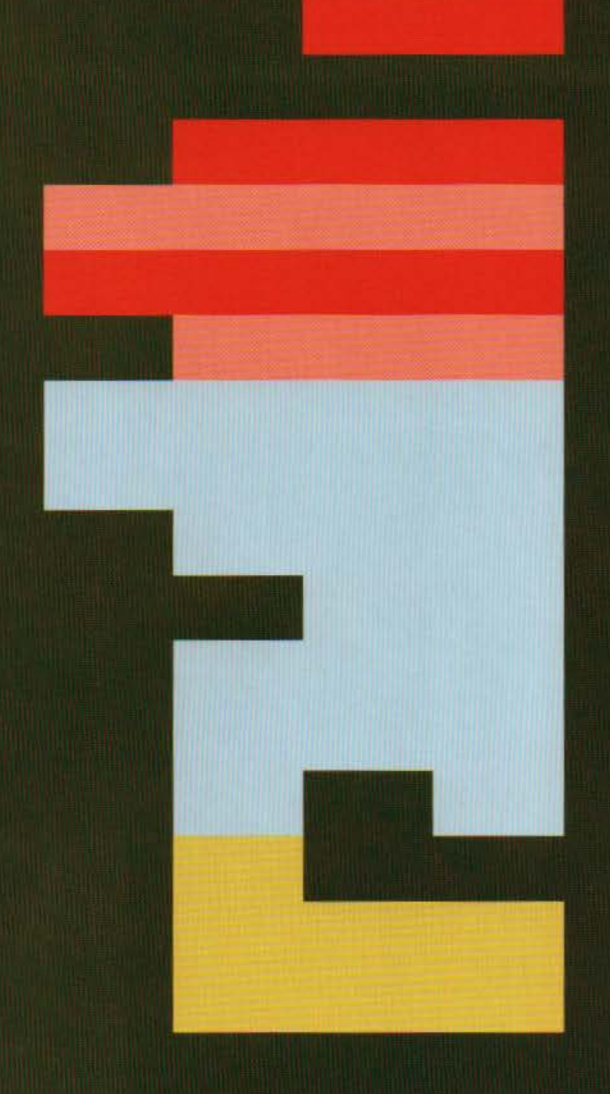
THE MAKING OF...
ET THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL

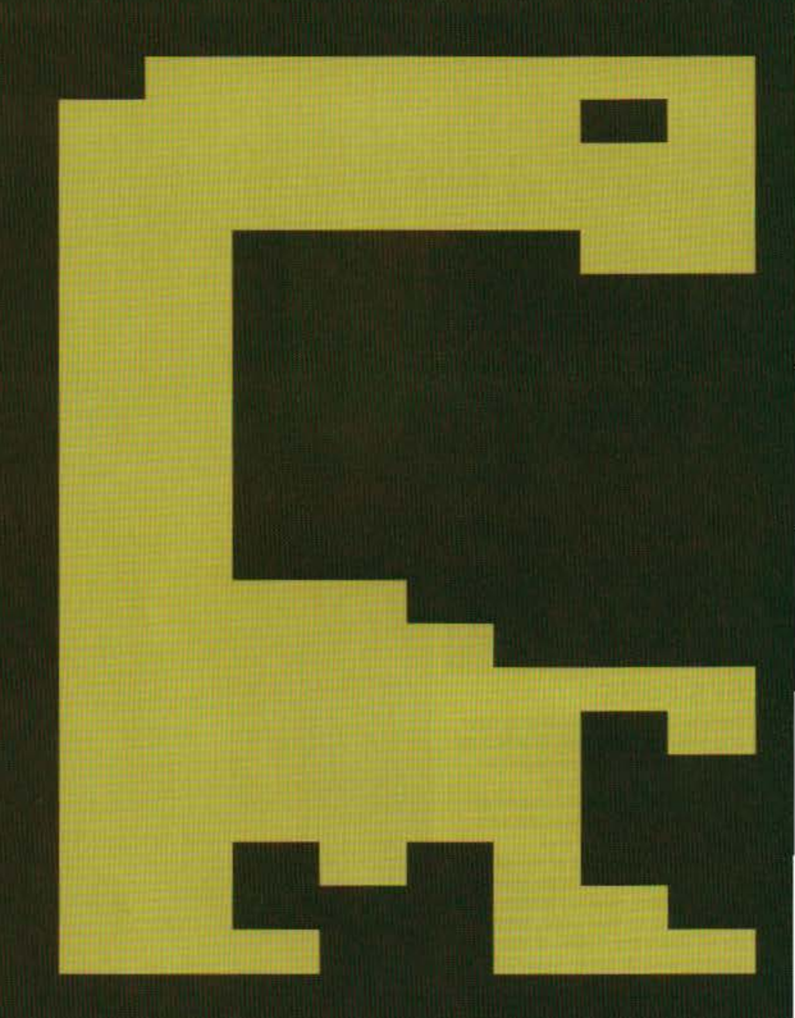
Could one Atari VCS cartridge really bring an industry to its knees? We dig deep to discover the truth about 'The Worst Game Ever Made'

FORMAT: **ATARI VCS** PUBLISHER: **ATARI** DEVELOPER: **HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **1982**

This story is full of holes. There's the hole in Atari's finances created by the $22 million spent on acquiring the licence to ET. There are the holes – or, more accurately, 'wells' – in which the stranded alien spends an inordinate amount of time during gameplay. There's the hole in the New Mexico desert where several million unsold *ET* cartridges are reputedly buried. And there's the hole into which Atari fell after the game's commercial failure – such a







gaping chasm that it not only consumed a company once famed for being the fastest growing in American history, but still had room for the rest of the billion-dollar videogame industry to come tumbling in after.

Meet the gravedigger – **Howard Scott Warshaw**, creator of *ET*. Since joining Atari in January 1981, Warshaw had enjoyed huge success with his first project, *Yar's Revenge*, the best-selling original VCS game in the console's history. He followed this with *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, his second million-seller, and established a rapport with Steven Spielberg while developing this early film-licensed game. "We had a delightful chat," recalls Warshaw, wistfully. "I explained to him he was an alien."

Despite, or perhaps because of, this insight, Spielberg specifically requested Warshaw work on the *ET* project. In truth, no one was fighting for the job. The multimillion-dollar deal between Spielberg and Atari management was only finalised on July 25 1982, yet the coding of the game had to be completed by September 1 to allow the cartridge to be mass produced in time for the lucrative Christmas market. George Kiss, Warshaw's boss at the time, categorically stated that it couldn't be done in such a miniscule timeframe. With contracts already signed, a desperate Ray Kassar, Atari's CEO, phoned Warshaw.

"He asked me if I could do it and I said yeah – as long as we could reach the right deal," Warshaw explains. "Sure, that meant a substantial bonus, but it really wasn't about the money. A game typically took six to eight months to develop. They wanted this in five weeks. It was a huge technical challenge and I find that kind of thing hard to resist."

The time constraints immediately became apparent when Warshaw was required to

The game is laid out as a cube, with the landing site at the top and the town at the bottom, crucial for enabling a quick sprint once ET is ready to phone home



ET'S EGGS

Despite the limits imposed by time and only 8K of memory in which to work, Warshaw still managed to include Easter eggs in *ET*.

"I was always a proponent of the value of hidden features to a game," he asserts. "I was determined that each of my games would feature a character from my previous ones, plus my initials and the number of that game. With *ET* it's all about the flower. If Elliot is holding exactly seven Reese's Pieces – I chose seven because that's 111 in binary, so it's easy to mask – and you have the right phone pieces when you heal the flower, it becomes Yar. Do it again on the second level, it turns into Indy, and on the third, you get HSW3. And if you look at the phone pieces themselves, they're the letters H, S and W, bent and twisted."

For more Atari secrets, investigate Warshaw's candid account of his time there via a DVD, available from www.onceuponatari.com

produce an entire game design document in two days, yet there was a pleasant reminder of the huge sums of cash involved when he was ferried by Lear jet and limo to Spielberg's offices in Burbank, California, to present his ideas.

"I wanted to do something original, something fresh and new. I was explaining about how I wanted to go for some emotion and really bring out the characters, and Spielberg looks at me and says: 'Erm, couldn't we just go for something like *Pac-Man*?' I couldn't believe it. My impulse was to say: 'Yeah, Close Encounters was interesting but couldn't you have done something like The Day The Earth Stood Still?'"

Warshaw's keen desire to innovate with each new game – a commitment shared by many then and considerably fewer now – meant a lazy rehash of an existing title was immediately dismissed. While others may have struggled to find a workable game concept from a largely action-free film, past a tenuous 'Elliot and ET on a flying bike shooting stuff' idea, Warshaw could see the potential of the licence beyond its commercial potency.

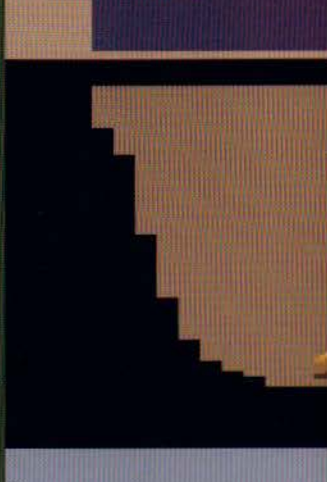
"To me, the movie does lend itself to a game. It has a treasure hunt element of building the phone, it has the race component of beating the adult humans, it has hunting, evasion, even stealth elements… It's not a single-screen shooter, which is maybe what's appropriate for the 2600, but I don't always think appropriately. I was thinking big!"

He was also thinking in 3D. Warshaw envisioned the six-screen map wrapped around a cube. The forest was located on the top face, the buildings of Washington DC at the base, and the remaining four sides would be littered with wells that hid the pieces of ET's elusive phone. It was an unusual and initially confusing construct, but made sense once a player could visualise the virtual world.

More bold game design was evident in choosing ET as the protagonist, rather than Elliot. "I didn't want to make a game with just another kid running around. By making ET the lead, I felt I could do something more interesting, both graphically and in playing around with his abilities. I could push against the restrictions of the licence. None of my design choices were made willy-nilly… they were all analysed to the nth degree."

So began the gargantuan task of realising his ambitious vision in a mere five weeks. They passed in a blur of almost continual coding and colossal cannabis consumption. Warshaw had a development system installed in his house to save on commuting time to Atari headquarters and





worked tirelessly and predominantly alone. However, he is swift to praise the work of graphic artist Jerome Domurat and the unwavering support of his manager, Condon Brown. "I've never publicly credited Condon's role," he admits, somewhat ashamed. "Such a wonderful guy,











and I always took great care when pronouncing his name."

And at the end of the five weeks he had several ulcers, a supremely reticent girlfriend and one complete game to submit to a massively relieved management, who then proceeded to optimistically manufacture five million copies. Warshaw had delivered a product with much polish – an impressive title screen, a spirited version of the film's theme tune and multi-coloured nonplayer characters, thanks to some ingenious coding which allowed the three low-res sprites to augment the two available hi-res sprites through simultaneous colour and graphical updates.

"I just don't buy the whole landfill story. They could have recycled them to save on burial expenses. Which would you choose?"

As a technical achievement, *ET* was a success. As a project considered impossible in the allotted time, Warshaw had confounded his detractors. But as a piece of entertainment software, he also confounded his audience.

"People were coming to the game expecting to be as entertained as they had been by one of the most beloved movies of all time. And they just thought: 'What the fuck?' Players don't care what went into making a game or how quickly it had to be done, they just care about the end result and in that sense it was a failure. I had no time to do any fine-tuning – the balancing of a game that makes it compelling. When you're up to your ass in alligators, it's hard to remember the point was to drain the swamp."

Heading up the list of player grievances was the frustrating plunging into wells that occurred at annoying frequency throughout the game, something Warshaw says could have been addressed with just another week of dev time. Bugs were prevalent, too, the spaceship deciding to land on an unsuspecting Elliot being particularly memorable, but with the game spending a mere two days in testing, none were ever reported back to Warshaw to be addressed. Yet even with these obvious flaws, the mantle of 'Worst Game Ever Made' seems wholly unfair.

"I wouldn't bandy the term 'unfair' around too widely," suggests Warshaw. "The reason people think it's a horrible game is the same reason Atari ultimately died – over-built expectations. Atari would consistently and unashamedly promise way, way over what they could deliver and charge people accordingly.

"When the whole videogames industry crashed, *ET* was where the blame was focused. If you want to tell the story of a whole society, you pick a person and do it through his or her eyes. To do that with an industry, you pick a single product."

So the pixellated extra-terrestrial became the fall guy for irresponsible marketing and reckless financial decision-making. Warshaw admits to taking a perverse pride in the ridiculous notion he singlehandedly toppled a billion-dollar industry and, subscribing to the notion that there's no such thing as bad publicity, he takes pleasure in the fact that the fruits of that frenzied five weeks of effort are still talked about today. Before we finish, though, he wants to bury one of *ET*'s most enduring claims to infamy.

"I just don't buy the whole landfill story. Think it through. Atari was in dire financial straits. They could either ship millions of unsold cartridges to the desert, ride tractors over them and bury them under concrete as if they were nuclear waste, which would have cost a fortune, or they could recycle them, reuse the ROMs and save on burial expenses. Which would you choose? Plus, I was pretty tied in to the whole Atari gossip grapevine and there were plenty of people who would've loved to tell me they were burying a ton of my games. And if I'd known, I would have hired a plane and a photographer and got a picture of me standing on top of them!"

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Venom Games Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: 2003

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 27

STUDIO HEAD: Peter Johnson (below inset), plus five department heads



URL: www.venomgames.co.uk

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Rocky: Legends (PS2, Xbox)







Venom is currently porting PC shooter *Prey*, based on the Doom 3 engine, to Xbox 360





LOCATION:
Newcastle
(Tyne And Wear)

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Prey (360), plus unannounced next-gen console title

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Venom Games was founded from the core team at Rage Games' Newcastle Studio. After creating hits for Rage including *Rocky* (PS2, Xbox) and *Expendable* (PC, PS) we became one of a few studios to rise up again from the ashes with the aim of keeping a talented team together, our reputation helping us to secure the funding we needed through the inevitably difficult transition period with a six-man team in a rented room and no contracts in place.

"The first title to be developed by our studio was *Rocky: Legends* for Ubisoft. The game was released on schedule for Christmas 2004, and with its successful release came the acquisition of the company by 2K Games. This move allowed us to expand to meet the challenge of developing for the next round of consoles – Xbox 360 and PS3. In the past year we have moved into new, larger offices and nearly doubled in size, and we are still looking for more talented people to join us.

"We are a very experienced team – many team members have over ten years of industry experience and at least four now have over 20. We have seen many changes as the industry develops and evolves but still strongly believe that experience is the key to our success."





Revenge of the PC

While 2006 may be tagged as the year of new consoles, it could be an equally big year for followers of the PC platform



It's a truism that as a new wave of consoles washes into play so attention switches from the PC. It makes sense from a technical point of view, of course. The architecture of all consoles, both in terms of design and production, relies on advances in the field of general computing. But the economies of scale offered by the 150m-unit console market means companies such as Sony and Microsoft can accelerate the process, launching bleeding-edge hardware ahead of the curve. So while members of hardcore firstperson shooter clans end up shelling out £500 annually for the latest graphics cards, the mass marketability of console pricing means for a £300 Xbox 360 (or even a £400 PlayStation 3), you're getting at least three years of futureproofed gaming technology.

More worryingly for PC-only developers and publishers, this is an ongoing process which has steadily eroded the traditional PC gaming market. North American sales in 2005 were down to $953 million, a drop of 14 per cent compared to 2004. This trend has continued year on year since 1999, when sales of PC games peaked at $1.9 billion.

The mutability of the PC also means it has the potential to be the most powerful gaming machine available





PC trend #1: Physics gets physical

It didn't manage to meet its Christmas launch schedule, but Ageia's $200 PhysX physics PC add-in board should be available as **Edge** hits the shelves.

"Our goal is to change the level of realism in games," says Ageia CEO and co-founder **Manju Hegde**. "At the moment, in software you can have 30, 50 or maybe 100 active objects, but with PhysX you can do 30,000. That's a tremendous difference, especially as there are other features such as fluids that you just can't do running physics on the CPU."

But the biggest factor in any success won't be what the hardware can do, rather the quality of the supporting games. "We're expecting between five and 15 titles that matter at launch," Hegde says.

And there have certainly been plenty of developers and publishers signing up, with the likes of Atari, Shiny, Sega, Ubisoft and Mythic supporting PhysX. It's been integrated within Epic's Unreal Engine 3, too.

One of Ageia's tricks to encourage take-up has been to offer its software physics engine for free, as long as the resulting games also support the PhysX hardware. This means developers can implement the usual array of rigid body collisions, ragdoll animation and complex cloth simulations in their games for PlayStation and Xbox platforms as well as PC. Only in the case of the PC do they have to create the additional assets that will be used should a gamer be packing PhysX.

It's a strategy which has had some interesting repercussions in terms of physics middleware. Before Ageia came into the market, Irish provider Havok was preeminent. With Ageia expecting to make its money from the sales of physics cards, not the sale of middleware, Havok has had to react quickly to stop its business being cut from beneath it.

One answer is Havok FX. Like Ageia's approach, it uses the power of hardware to improve the level of physical simulation in PC games. Unlike the dedicated PhysX chip, however, Havok FX can run on any high-end graphics card and especially leverages the potential of dual cards such as Nvidia's SLI and ATI's Crossfire configurations.

Havok's **Jeff Yates** says he thinks it's a more sensible way for players to improve their game experience: "If consumers are going to get an extra piece of hardware on their PC, it doesn't make sense they would buy something that may sit idle while the physics is not active in the game. But an extra GPU can do physics or graphics."

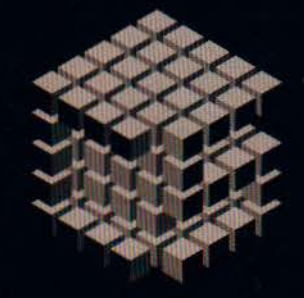


Tagged by some as the next big thing in PC gaming, Ageia's PhysX is an add-on physics processing solution. Priced at around $200, it is expected to be available mid-February



One of ways Ageia hopes its PhysX board will revolutionise game physics is in the visualisation of complex fluids, whether that be fire or water





A continuing area for realtime graphics research, the human face is incredibly difficult to model thanks to the semi-transparent nature of skin combined with its subtly deformable nature, but ATI thinks it's making strong progress

Of course, there are plenty of areas acolytes can emphasise to encourage the faithful. Those US sales figures don't include growing niches such as downloaded games or online game subscriptions, which account for around $3 billion worth of global sales. The mutability of the PC also means it has the potential to be the most powerful gaming machine available, assuming money is really no object.

And there are several strong reasons for new hope in 2006: Ageia will launch its PhysX physics card; Microsoft's long-awaited Vista operating system is due; while the ongoing performance battle between graphics card firms ATI and Nvidia will only become more intense.

It's such an outlook that encouraged Michael Dell, of Dell Computers, to take a sideswipe at Xbox 360 when announcing the company's limited edition XPS 600 Renegade system at the 2006 Consumer Electronics Show. Boasting an overclocked 4.26 GHz Intel Extreme Edition dual-core CPU and the capacity to run four Nvidia graphics cards, Dell claimed that it was more powerful than any game console.

For the PC's supporters, at least, the future remains a lighter shade of beige.



The future of PC graphics, according to these ATI demos, includes the ability to handle massive amounts of geometry data using level-of-detail systems to offload the burden for far-away objects, as well as cinematic effects such as the reflection and refraction of dynamic water and depth-of-field effects to highlight the dramatic nature of encounters

PC trend #2: Through the new window

The launch of a new Microsoft operating system is always a big event for the PC market. And with gaming now a priority for the company, thanks in part to Xbox and 360, the change in emphasis is expected to be well to the fore whenever Vista finally meets its public.

"Gaming is one of the most important elements for Vista," emphasises **Chris Donahue**, lead technical evangelist for the Windows Graphics And Gaming Group. "Sixty per cent of Windows software sales are games of some sort, but most PC users don't associate themselves as gamers. This needs to change."

This attitude will be reinforced with a major advertising spend on gaming as part of the Vista launch.

There will also be some obvious changes in terms of the consumer experience. Games will be highlighted within the menu system and be more accessible in terms of patches and upgrades, as well as enabling parental controls. Another element will be WinSAT. The Windows System Assessment Tool is a profiler which analyses the specification of a PC. This means developers can ensure their games run at the optimal settings in terms of resolution and rendering quality. The console-style Easy Install option means PC games can be played as soon as the disc is placed in the drive.

There will also be changes for developers to get their heads around. Key will be the introduction of DirectX 10. A collection of standard technologies for PC gaming, DX10 marks what Donahue calls the beginning of the 'next-next-gen' hardware.

"It's designed to handle a five to tenfold increase in performance," he says. Crucially, however, unlike previous versions of DirectX, DX10 will mark a clean break from the past. "Just as there's a break between Windows XP and Vista, so between DirectX 9 and 10," claims Donahue. "It had to happen at some point."

These changes include a new driver model, the introduction of Shader Model 4.0 and a new scheduler and memory virtualisation system. One outcome is that games which use DirectX 10 won't work on PCs running Windows XP. Similarly, games developed using older versions of DirectX will have to be handled through a software layer, causing the usual performance hit associated with emulation.



Games will be a more important component of Microsoft's upcoming Vista operating system, with many improvements promised in terms of installing, updating and generally getting games to work in a more transparent fashion than they have previously

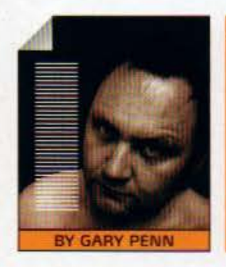
PC trend #3: Faster, faster graphics cards

As tick follows tock, so ATI's latest announcement followed the previous one from Nvidia. What remains continually surprising, however, is the capacity of the high-end PC market to accept ever more complex and expensive graphics cards. Nvidia's decision to launch its dual-configuration Scalable Link Interface (SLI) technology in 2004, thereby doubling the annual upgrade cost for a 50 per cent performance hike, even caught arch-rival ATI by surprise, although it followed suit with Crossfire last year.

In terms of current top dog status, ATI's just-launched X1900 architecture is considered most capable. But so it should be: consisting of 321 million transistors, it's the most complex consumer GPU ever produced, and costing $650 in its Radeon X1900 XTX configuration, the most pricey too. Technical markers in the sand for the XTX include 48 pixel shaders, a clock speed of 650MHz, 512Mb of DDR3 memory and a 512bit ring-bus controller to ensure information can be passed quickly between its components. The result, says ATI, is silicon that's rated at a massive 554 gigaflops.

But the thinking behind such power isn't just about grunt, as **Richard Huddy**, who's in charge of European developer relations at ATI, attests: "It's not about framerate any more but about the cinematic use of pixels. With almost all PC games now using pixel shaders to create effects such as soft shadows and atmospheric lighting, the focus for developers is making sure their pixels are as beautiful as possible. On average, developers are applying around 30 shaders to each pixel they draw. But already some are using hundreds."

One technique enabled through such processing is parallax occlusion mapping (sometimes simply termed parallax mapping). Like previously explored techniques such as normal and displacement maps, this works by adding three-dimensional effects, such as self-shadowing on detailed flat surfaces like walls and floors, and can already be seen in the likes of *Perfect Dark Zero* on Xbox 360.



MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD
Filtering the media melange

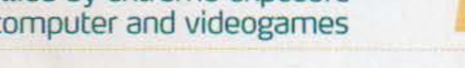
Attention spans are shrivelling but multitasking skills are on the rise. We quickly grow bored of anything that isn't constantly, obviously changing. We rush headlong towards the money shot not necessarily because the foreplay disinterests – just because our appetites are so much harder to satisfy. We don't have time to linger, to take slow-burning satisfaction, because we have so many more choices to make instead. The trouble is that there's so much choice – so much more is so much more convenient that we are so spoiled for choice and finding it harder to choose to the point of paralysis. (I say 'we' – I'm generalising, of course, to ingratiate or alienate.)

It's not uncommon for me to end up listening to music while alternating between watching subtitled TV or film, reading a magazine or book, playing a game and conversing. I make my own multimedia mix of entertainment. I need to be heavily engaged – there's seldom enough to fulfil a single sense. I need more – more senses absorbed more fully.

But this is less about embracing choice and more about reflecting my inability to become wholly absorbed by anything for longer than five minutes – and easily distracted to boot. I have allowed myself to be sullied by extreme exposure to multiple media, especially computer and videogames. I hardly ever experience any entertainment in its entirety any longer, but it doesn't matter. I enjoy piecing together big pictures from fragments – a melange of moments.

I sample as much as I can as quickly as I can, and make snap judgements. It saves me wasting time trying something just in case it improves and becomes more involving (it so seldom does). It's not a matter of forming opinions based on superficial contact – more relying on the true beauty to shine through from the outset. There has to be promise, a suggestion of something to make the journey worth enduring – and to make the establishing experience satisfying. A slow build is all very well, but there has to be an overture, a glimmer of hope – a taste of the shape of things to come.

All this is easily undermined by too much choice beforehand – too many layers of shit to cut through before I even get to play (and that's without considering plodding cinematic ceremonies that cannot be sped up, let alone avoided). Why more of this bureaucracy can't be naturalised (as in seamlessly part of the natural order of play) I don't know (*Animal Crossing: Wild World*, by all accounts, makes a considerable effort here). The increased use of Quick Play (or equivalent) options as a shortcut through all the crap acknowledges but doesn't fundamentally address the problem.



> I have allowed myself to be sullied by extreme exposure to multiple media, especially computer and videogames

There was a time when I was 'pro choice' with play, and linearity made me cross. I enjoyed the illusion of freedom in the likes of *Elite*, *Mercenary*, *Exile*, *Stars* and eventually *GTA*. It's like theatrical improvisation. A few prompts aside, there's no one to tell you what to do and when to do it.

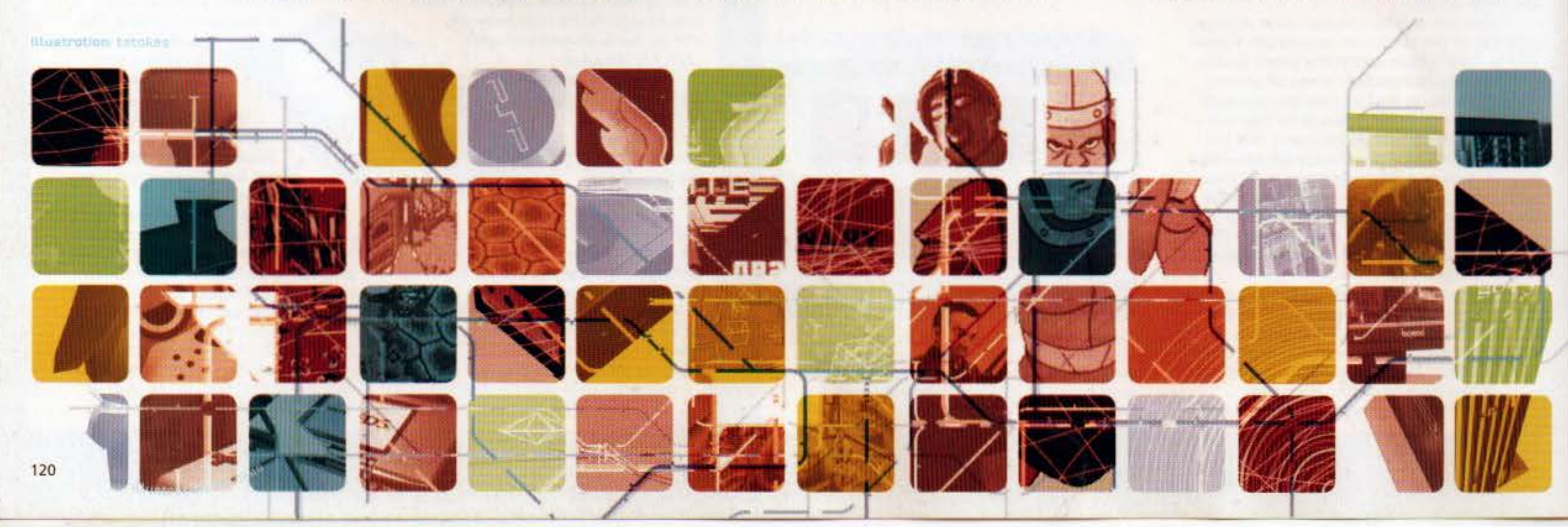
Which weapon to use? Which route to take? How best to go about this? How much choice? How far-reaching the choice? The more complex the microcosm, the more choices emerge and the more direction is required, making development all the more demanding, having to consider and cater for ever-increasing player outcomes. Having fewer choices provides a definite safety net for all concerned, although I'm not advocating an extreme akin to those simple roleplaying books, *Dragon's Lair*, et al.

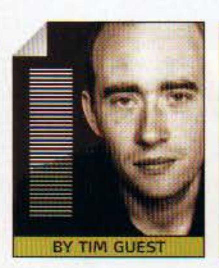
It's said that meaningful choices are a key factor in making games compelling (the same could be said about life in general). An increasingly common 'meaningful' choice is between good and evil, seeing both sides of the coin. The formality of such a choice – by providing either a formal choice or formal recognition (because it only becomes a valid choice if the product officially acknowledges your actions and achievements) – makes it just one more decision I'd rather not consciously have to make.

It might be a phase, overexposure to the medium and supposed freedom of choice, age, growing disinterest or just plain idleness. But I'm bored with too much choice. I want direction – more obvious routes toward better reasons to make choices. Not for points or superficial prizes but for obvious results – clear-cut change, an obvious difference, masturbatory self-satisfaction not orgiastic achievements that only have meaning when shared with others. Actually, age does have something to do with it – experience makes much of The New less fresh, more obviously contrived, less appealing or profound – easier to shortcut and predict, if not in terms of content or delivery then in terms of concept and how it engages. That true lack of choice isn't surprising – it's all sown from the same seeds. The bottom line is this: you accept more of the same and enjoy it for what it is or move on to something else. Other forms of entertainment. Other choices.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki

Illustration: tatokes

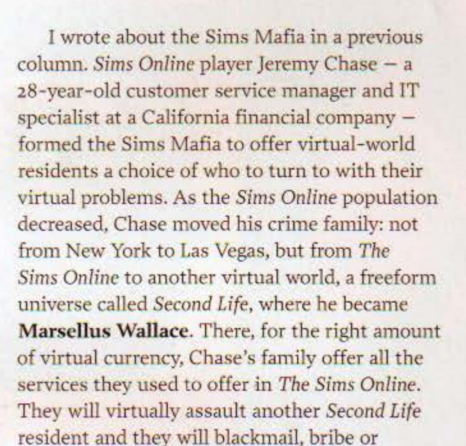



BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN
Burning issues

In February last year, Qiu Chengwe, a 41-year-old player of the online swords'n'sorcery game *Legends Of Mir* in which thousands of Chinese players gather to fight monsters and earn virtual booty, loaned his hard-won dragon sabre to a friend, 26-year-old Zhu Caoyan. Instead of returning the sword, Zhu sold it on to another player for 7,200 yuan – about £500. Qui Chengwe approached the police, but because the sword existed only inside the game, no law had been broken. So one morning, a month later, Qui broke into Zhu's house. Zhu barely had time to put on his underwear before Qui stabbed him to death.

In June, a Chinese court sentenced Qiu Chengwe to death. (The sentence was suspended, and Qui will spend at least 15 years behind bars.) Punishing crimes that take place entirely in virtual worlds, though, isn't always so straightforward.



Through the electronic looking glass, the rules of conduct are less clear. This is why Chase can be proud of his virtual crime family

I wrote about the Sims Mafia in a previous column. *Sims Online* player Jeremy Chase – a 28-year-old customer service manager and IT specialist at a California financial company – formed the Sims Mafia to offer virtual-world residents a choice of who to turn to with their virtual problems. As the *Sims Online* population decreased, Chase moved his crime family: not from New York to Las Vegas, but from *The Sims Online* to another virtual world, a freeform universe called *Second Life*, where he became **Marsellus Wallace**. There, for the right amount of virtual currency, Chase's family offer all the services they used to offer in *The Sims Online*. They will virtually assault another *Second Life* resident and they will blackmail, bribe or collect debts from your virtual enemies. (In *The Sims Online* they used to hire virtual escorts, but Chase – who once ran a porn site in his spare time – closed down the prostitution rackets because there was too great a risk of underage players hiring virtual hookers. In *Second Life*, however, where all the 100,000 other residents are over 18, hiring a virtual escort is as easy, and about as expensive, as buying a virtual pair of shoes.)

After a lengthy vetting process, I finally managed to meet Wallace. He received me in his virtual marble-floored mansion, sprawled in a virtual leather chair. "Currently, I have myself, the Consigliere, the Under-Boss, three Capos and several soldiers who work under the Capos," he told me. (The Sims Mafia has already built up a reputation in *Second Life*; an interior designer, eager to curry favour, furnished his mansion for free.) Wallace told me about his latest virtual strong-arm move. An associate called Drax Lumiex, who owned a *Second Life* establishment called the Red Dragon casino, had asked Wallace, who operated a profitable dice game, to share his expertise. They went into business together, and Lumiex even acted as groomsman for Wallace's virtual wedding. (His bride was Mackenzie Draper, another *Second Life* character, played by Chase's real-world girlfriend. As we talked, Draper, a pretty redhead, interrupted. She didn't approve of his mafia activities and – exercising the privilege of Mafia Boss's Wife – she wasn't afraid to say so.)

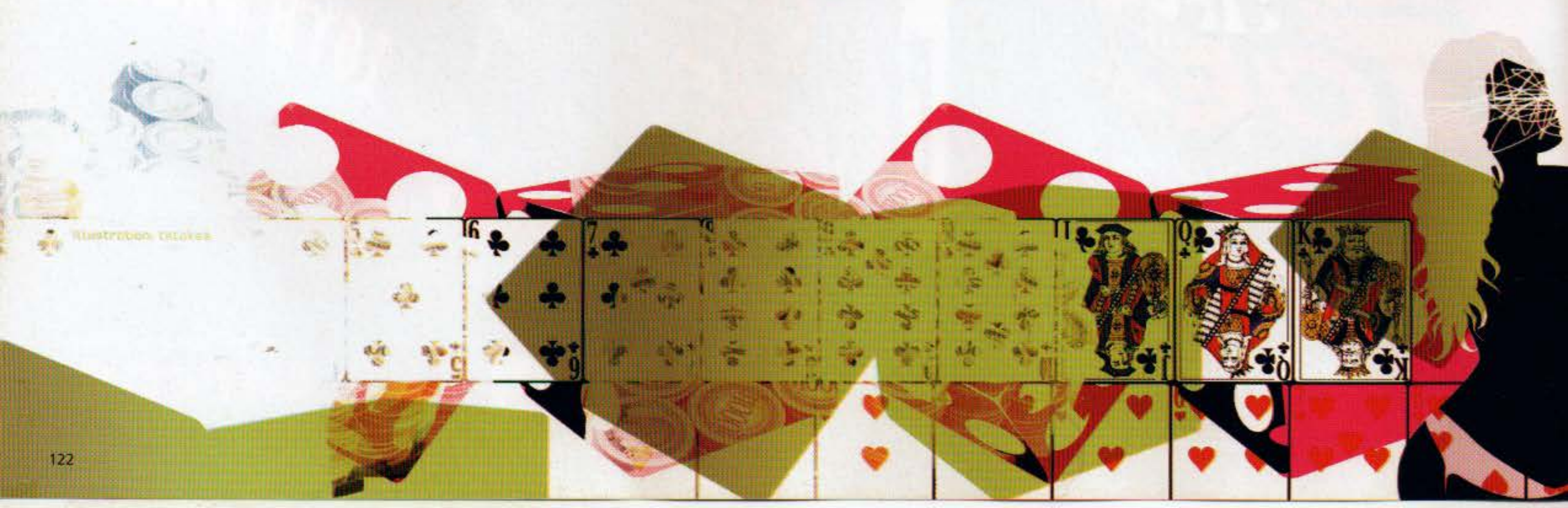
Wallace and Lumiex had planned to split the casino dice-game's virtual profits but, according to Lumiex, the casino always made a loss. Wallace sneaked in and installed himself as a dealer; his table made money. He walked over to the next table; that table also made money. A true mafia vendetta was in the offing. Even though Lumiex had been a groomsman at his wedding, Wallace couldn't let this stand.

Lumiex's casino was famous in *Second Life* for the unique facade: a huge sculpted red dragon with the casino door in place of the mouth. For months, Wallace worked to earn Lumiex's trust. Finally Lumiex asked Wallace to become a casino partner, and gave him permission to modify objects inside. Wallace decided to serve his vengeance cold. He deleted a partition wall, just to let Lumiex know what was coming. Lumiex panicked, and fumbled with his windows to try to revoke Wallace's object permissions. Then Wallace did the virtual equivalent of torching the place. He deleted the Red Dragon.

In the real world, time is money; in the virtual world, money is time. Lumiex had lost the weeks and months it took him to construct the casino and its reputation, but he had no recourse for its loss: his virtual den of iniquity had no real-world legal value. Game developers need it to remain that way, otherwise every bug, closure or game change would be followed by a class action suit for compensation. The games would become true economies; every player would have to fill in a tax return.

In the real world, Chase's mafia activities would be against the law. But through the electronic looking glass, the rules of conduct are less clear. This is why Jeremy Chase can be proud of his virtual crime family. His character name, which floats above his virtual head at all times, declares: 'Marsellus Wallace, Sim Mafia Boss'.

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta





BIFFOVISION

Plastic unfantasic

I finally succumbed to a long-resisted temptation to buy myself a big, up-yours plasma telly when I got hold of my Xbox 360. Though I had to remove the front wall of my house to get it in – and murder my wife to get away with the expense – it is without a shadow of a doubt the most erotic purchase I have ever made. A lovely, crisp, high-definition screen and a sound system to rattle expletives from my neighbours.

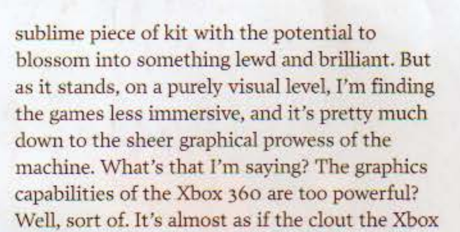
It was a given that it'd show off 360 games to their fullest, but it has unexpectedly regenerated my love of certain older titles. I can finally play multiplayer splitscreen without my eyes melting, and I've been going back to older PS2 and Xbox titles and literally sobbing at how lovely they now look. What I do find going back to these older titles is that often they look a lot better than the first wave of Xbox 360 games.

Don't get me wrong: I think the 360 is a sublime piece of kit with the potential to blossom into something lewd and brilliant. But as it stands, on a purely visual level, I'm finding the games less immersive, and it's pretty much down to the sheer graphical prowess of the machine. What's that I'm saying? The graphics capabilities of the Xbox 360 are too powerful? Well, sort of. It's almost as if the clout the Xbox 360 has is making graphic designers a bit lazy.

Many years ago, in a previous life, I was a graphic designer. I still remember the first time I played with Adobe Photoshop. It took me ages to stop applying filters to every design. It was so easy to apply a lens flare, or a distortion effect, and take a fairly uninspired graphic to a whole new level. You could see it happening in every magazine for a few years, and I can see exactly the same thing happening on the first wave of Xbox 360 games.

Perfect Dark Zero – or, as I like to call it, *Lara Croft's Adventure In Laminated Land* – is a perfect example. The actual design of the visuals is, at best, uninspired, the graphics team relying entirely on the machine to do the work for them. Reflections, and bump-mapping, and lighting, and shiny-shininess. Oh, it's all a wonderful demonstration of what the 360 is capable of. But are the graphics actually better?

For my money a supposedly last-generation game like *Shadow Of The Colossus* is a thousand times more gorgeous than *Perfect Dark Zero*. Not just because of its sublime atmosphere and glorious art design, but because the characters move in a way that you believe. Even something as hackneyed and bland as *Shadow The Hedgehog* is more 'believable' because, again, you have a character which belongs in his world. Who knows how a cartoon hedgehog of questionable morality is supposed to move? With game designers inexplicably obsessed with recreating the real world they seem to have been on the verge of photorealism for some time, but the way characters move has been stuck in the Dark Ages for years. Or, at least, an era when everyone had rickets.



> "For my money a supposedly last-generation game like Shadow Of The Colossus is a thousand times more gorgeous than PDZ"

As much as I love *Call Of Duty 2* – and it's quite possible to become caught up in the senses-juddering sensory onslaught – I'm always pulled out of it by the animation. Nobody moves like real people. They jerk from one cycle of movement to the next, all pretty much moving in exactly the same way. Likewise King Kong; the Xbox 360 version is one of the most visually impressive games I've ever seen. But the character movement stinks. If we can produce a game that can recreate war-torn Stalingrad, and lush, tropical islands, can it really be that much more difficult to produce a game with human characters that move like human characters?

Back when all games were about cartoon animals you accepted the movement of a 2D sprite, because it worked in relation to the rest of its environment. Now we're being treated to gorgeous, realistic recreations of reality, but they remain populated by arthritic cripples. Even the benchmark *Half-Life 2* was let down – for me – by the movement of its human characters, and *Resident Evil 4* falls apart when the character switches from walking to running. The transition from one state of movement to the other is a jarring reminder that you're controlling a videogame character.

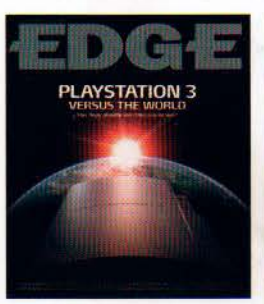
The more stylised the visuals are, the less of a problem it becomes. Any of the new *Prince Of Persia* games seem to work – staying true to the series' origins as an early barometer of realistic videogame animation. But scale up from there and you're immediately in trouble. All attention seems to be paid to the world, and the textures, and special lighting effects, and characters still move like they're trying not to disturb a big crap cake in their pants.

Of course, the 360 is a whole new set of kit for developers, and doubtless Rare were like kids with a new toy, slapping that horrible plasticisation on every surface and character. But I'm hoping that as subsequent waves of games start to arrive that developers learn a bit of restraint, and realise there's more to a good-looking game than ensuring your characters all have rubbery foreheads.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television







Issue 159

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Gaming slang

When a game glitches and you fall through the floor or get rammed through a building (*Driver, GTA3* anyone?) we always call it "the third place".
freethinker

A number of my mates utter the Zelda 'duh duh duh duhhhhhh!' jingle of joy when you open a chest, whenever a stroke of luck or other positive event happens to them. Case in point, my current housemate likes to make bread, and utters said jingle when a particularly well-risen loaf comes out the oven.
Mr. Brooks

Not really slang but I know someone who does a perfect impression of the *Crazy Taxi* commentator, he slips it into conversation all the time, eg: "Oh, man! That was some Crrrazzzzy cornflakes," "Hey, hey! Come on over and have some fun with Crrraazzzzzy Steve." Yeah, it gets pretty annoying.
Larry David

We asked for your opinions on the next-generation console war, following our 'PlayStation 3 versus the world' cover story, and we received tons of letters, taking up various strands of the debate. Here are the (edited) highlights (and some not-so-highlights, too).

I thought it was irresponsible for **Edge** not to shed any light on why Sony felt the need to show off prerendered sequences at last year's E3 rather than genuine PS3 footage. I remember reading reports in newspapers and on websites that were totally sucked in by the hype and would have thought that this would have been an ideal opportunity to get Sony to explain why it misled the world about what the PS3 can actually do.
Gemmell

At the time of compiling the feature, Sony simply refused to go on record regarding any specific PS3 issue. Next month's issue should have some direct answers for you, though.

The PS3 feature in **E**159 left me puzzled. It wasn't like a usual **Edge** feature, it was more like an extended version of one of Mr Biffo's columns but without the jokes, and also in certain places it read like an investor briefing (as someone who's worked in banking, I know a thing or two about such documents). I think it was because it didn't feature interviews with the players in the next-gen console war, which is what I would expect from **Edge**. Even if it was just J Allard assuring us that the Xbox 360 is actually more powerful than the PS3 – honest! – or Reggie claiming that his new controller would allow him to kick ass in 'revolutionary' new ways, I would have liked to have heard what they think about Sony's next machine.
Fraser Johns

As it clearly stated in **E**159's editorial intro, in this instance we were focusing on bigger-picture issues and their implications, not what some might perceive to be marketing hyperbole. Which isn't to say that there isn't room for Microsoft and Nintendo to share their feelings on PS3; we'll bring you their thoughts post-E3, in issue 164.

You say that Revolution is going to be unlike the DS because its controller isn't like anything we've used, but what about when we first played with joysticks?

Why, when you were setting out to write an article about Sony's new console, did you even bother to mention the Nintendo Revolution? You yourself admit that Nintendo are going after a totally different market to Sony and Microsoft this time around, so why bother talking about its controller or the type of games we will see on it?

To your credit, you did concede that Revolution is going to play host to the widest variety of software of all the next-generation consoles, but even then you couldn't help but ask if female gamers who buy the machine are likely to buy many games for it. Have Nintendo forgotten to send **Edge** free games lately or something?
O Grinder

The free games are still coming – and we're still really enjoying them. No, the point is this: Nintendo may be looking to draw in people who haven't ever played games before, but its core audience for Revolution, certainly for the short to medium term, will be the same people who've always loved Nintendo consoles. So it remains in competition with the likes of Sony and Microsoft, and is wholly relevant to a discussion driven by PS3.

You say that the Revolution is going to be unlike the DS because its controller isn't like anything we've used before, but wasn't that the case when we first played games in the 1970s? I don't remember using a joystick before I got my hands on my brother's Atari VCS at Christmas at the age of eight, but I do remember it feeling totally natural.

Also, I think you are underestimating the appeal of backwards compatibility on Revolution. Who wouldn't want to explore the light and dark worlds of *A Link To The Past* once more (for some lucky gamers it'll be their first time!), and what about the likes of *PilotWings* (I still can't believe we never got a GameCube update!), a totally unique experience on both the SNES and N64 that proves Nintendo can turn their hands to anything if they want to?

Just before Christmas I showed my DS and *Mario Kart DS* to three friends who were thinking of buying PSPs and they all changed their minds and are now proud owners of Nintendo's handheld. They are looking forward to the PS3 but I expect I might have to show them my Revolution when I get it, and then we'll see what happens...
Scott Cavendish

Revolution's backwards compatibility certainly shouldn't be downplayed as a concept, but at the moment it is just



that: a concept, not a model. We need to see how its implementation pans out in order for it be clear how significant a part of the entire Revolution picture it is.

Just as the DS has found itself as my most played console, despite the graphical whizzbangery of everything around it, I fully expect that the new Nintendo machine will make teraflops and Blu-ray as relevant to the future of gaming as a baked-bean cans and string are to the future of mobile phones.

But Nintendo will not 'win' the forthcoming war for a number of reasons. Generally, we in the west are obsessed with power and Joe Bloggs is won over by a pretty lightshow, but that isn't Nintendo's biggest problem. What's to say that Sony don't take some notes, observe and then produce their own revolutionary controller as an add-on, an optional extra, to the PS3, alienating nobody, encouraging everybody in their own bullish style?

Despite what Nintendo may hope, it is the PS2's recent party-game explosion and not the quarterly Mario-hosted parties that have finally got my mum, my aunties and my grandparents to join in. Sony went for the 18-to-30s in the PlayStation days by sticking the consoles in clubs; they've got almost everyone else in the PS2 days by grading our singing like a docile Simon Cowell. Who'da thought it?
Jason Scott

And some might say that Nintendo actually looked at what Sony has done with the likes of *EyeToy Play* and *Singstar* and seen how well different 'controllers' can work before finalising its Revolution concept. Would we? We can imagine the letters already. Speaking of which...

So, you choose to do eight pages on the PlayStation 3. Eight pages where instead of filling them with hundreds of normal-sized words you could've simply printed one giant word per page. I'm thinking this: 'FINALLY **EDGE** ADMITS TO BEING IN SONY'S POCKETS'. Although I suppose such honesty would be asking too much...
bluedragon


As Anonymous suggests, Epic's Unreal Engine 3 middleware is made available in trial form with PlayStation 3 devkits

Despite what Nintendo may hope, it is the PS2's recent party-game explosion and not the Mario-hosted parties that finally got my family to join in

Sony should be careful, as I may just purchase their console as a cheap Blu-ray disc player. This means that they will lose a lot of the investment they put into the hardware hoping to be recouped from software sales. The only trouble is, where will I hide such a hideous piece of hardware?
David Fowkes

It's likely that many people will buy a PS3 for precisely the same reason. PS2's sales certainly benefitted from its DVD playback capabilities, so you can only imagine what PS3 will do with compatibility with a new movie format if it gets in there at the ground floor.

So, according to your article, the PlayStation 3 will have a hard drive? Since when exactly?
Maart

Some clarification is required: last month we stated that PS3 would have a hard drive as standard when in fact it may be only an option. It's not actually been confirmed whether Sony will follow Microsoft's model although, with base costs currently an issue, it's likely that there'll be a similar setup.

F

Topic: Morally-indefensible gaming

I used to steal money from my mum's bag to buy Master System games from my friend in first school (I promise this is not a metaphor for drugs). Confession time... What's the worst thing that you've done in the name of gaming?
z_m_b

Finding *Streets Of Rage* in the folks' cupboard just before Christmas and completing it before the big day.
Dr Havard

Leicester Forest East service station on the M1 had a great arcade which was pretty much unmonitored, allowing me to perfect the art of 'spinning' – putting the old massive ten pence pieces into the 50p slot slot and giving it a backwards spin whilst pushing in said coin, and, with patience, luck and skillage, you could get regularly get three credits for the price of one.
Uncle Monkey

Instead of having lunch at school, I used to use the money to buy all the Codemasters C64 games – great days. I also remember the days before barcodes, in which you could swap price stickers over in places like Woolworths. I'm sure you can imagine...
idespair

I was the project manager for *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness*. Beat that for evil.
chatsubo

As a young kid I funded my gaming through the piracy of Speccy games. Whilst this was pretty bad in itself, what was worse is that I sometimes duped my schoolmates. As I could code and was okay at coaxing a decent image through the colour clash, I'd occasionally knock up fake copies of soon-to-be-released titles. These consisted of a simple loader, a loading screen and finally an unfortunate R: Tape loading error at the end. In mitigation, I nearly always followed up with a 'proper' copy and I eventually learnt my lesson when I distributed a title that never saw release.
lloigor

Just because Sega messed up with its Mega Drive add-ons, everyone thinks that any add-ons these days are bad ideas, but there's no reason why releasing an HD-DVD drive for Xbox 360 shouldn't work. It is, after all, intended for movies, not games, and if you look at an Xbox 360 plus an HD-DVD add-on as a bundle it will probably work out cheaper than decent dedicated HD-DVD players, which will ensure that Microsoft's console looks an attractive proposition to anyone looking to upgrade their home cinema system.
ORT

True. That's assuming, of course, that there'll be a demand for HD-DVD players – Blu-ray may squeeze it out of the market the way Sony's own Betamax was once sidelined by VHS. And it may not. Ultimately, we have enough on our plates in the gaming world to be getting caught up in next-gen movie-disc format wars.

I work with a PlayStation 3 devkit every day (I can't tell you anything about our project yet, but I fully expect it to get 10/10 in **Edge**, wink wink) and my 'free' Unreal Engine 3 is nowhere to be seen. Does **Edge** know something we don't?
Anonymous

We received several emails on this topic, and some more clarification is needed. As you suggest, Epic's Unreal Engine 3 is supplied in trial format to the PS3 development community, not as some kind of packed-in freebie.

The comparison in your PS3 feature between the Xbox 360 in Japan and the Dreamcast doesn't hold up – Sega's machine was much more popular than Microsoft's when it first appeared. It also had a lot more killer software at launch, and was followed by a number of true classics (need I mention *Shenmue* or *Phantasy Star Online*? Even *ChuChu Rocket*? Thought not), which is not something I'm seeing on the Xbox 360 release schedules.

Microsoft will never make it in Japan even if it makes it to Xbox 1080, and it should give it up now and focus on Europe and America, leaving Japan to

Continued

two particular Japanese companies, Sony and Nintendo.
Gary Shepard

As this month's feature illustrates (p54), things are looking up for Xbox 360 support from Japan's development community, although heavy-hitters remain thin on the ground. In terms of direct Dreamcast comparisons, though, there is no doubt that Microsoft has a better handle of the online part of the equation.

I don't agree with the comments in your PS3 article regarding online gaming not being popular with game publishers. Having just moved from publishing to development, I can tell you that at my previous employer, senior management was falling over itself to sign up projects with online compatibility. I think it's also interesting that a British company like Codemasters should sign up so many MMORPGs from Korea – if this isn't a sign that online compatibility is what game publishers want, what is?
Anonymous

As a long-time *Counter-Strike* fan (I play *Source* for three to four hours almost every night of the week), I think the future for online gaming on the consoles will follow what has happened on the PC, with a small number of games attracting the largest number of players (look at what has happened with *World Of WarCraft* – no one I know plays any other MMOG), so it's no surprise that publishers aren't willing to invest in games that focus on offering lots of online playability.
karushi

Who wants online action? Well, every publisher would like at least a slice. How much is there to go around? That's the issue. A lot of money will be spent before the clear picture emerges.



Topic: Cardboard cut out trees

I was really hoping with the new generation of consoles we would see the back of cardboard cut out trees. If *PGR3* and *RR6* are anything to go by, unfortunately not. I wish someone would make a driving game where their attention is spent on the tracks and not the car models.
gomola

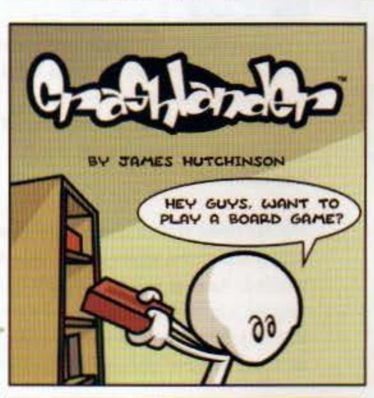
Forgive me for stating the obvious, but IT'S A GAME ABOUT CARS. *DOA Extreme Beach Volleyball* doesn't focus on the erosion of beaches.
Jonman

Surely the most important thing about trees is that developers are ecologically aware enough to make them from recycled cardboard. *Hang on...*
barrieluv

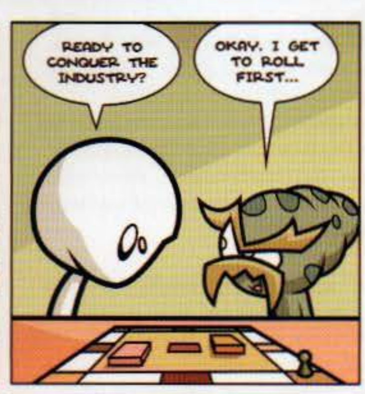
Congratulations – with your PlayStation 3 feature you finally turned into the UK version of the gone-and-not-at-all-missed Next Generation magazine. The only things missing were quotes from crappy American developers who've never made anything good but are desperate to be associated with the sexiest hardware so that their social standing is raised. Well done!
Figs

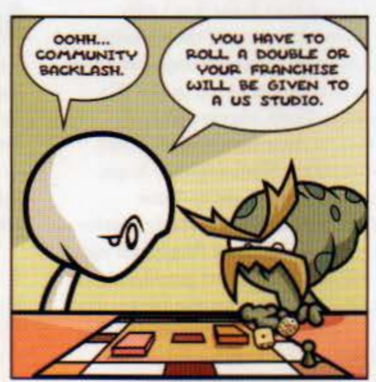
Hold on, we used to like Next Generation – it used to run some of **Edge**'s features, after all. When you call us *[censored by legal department]*, then we'll begin to worry.

Send us email (**edge@futurenet.co.uk**), but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW

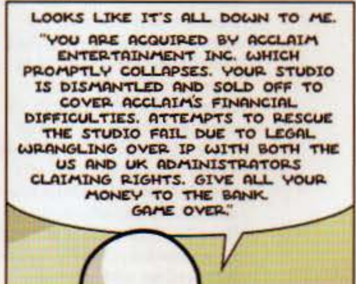














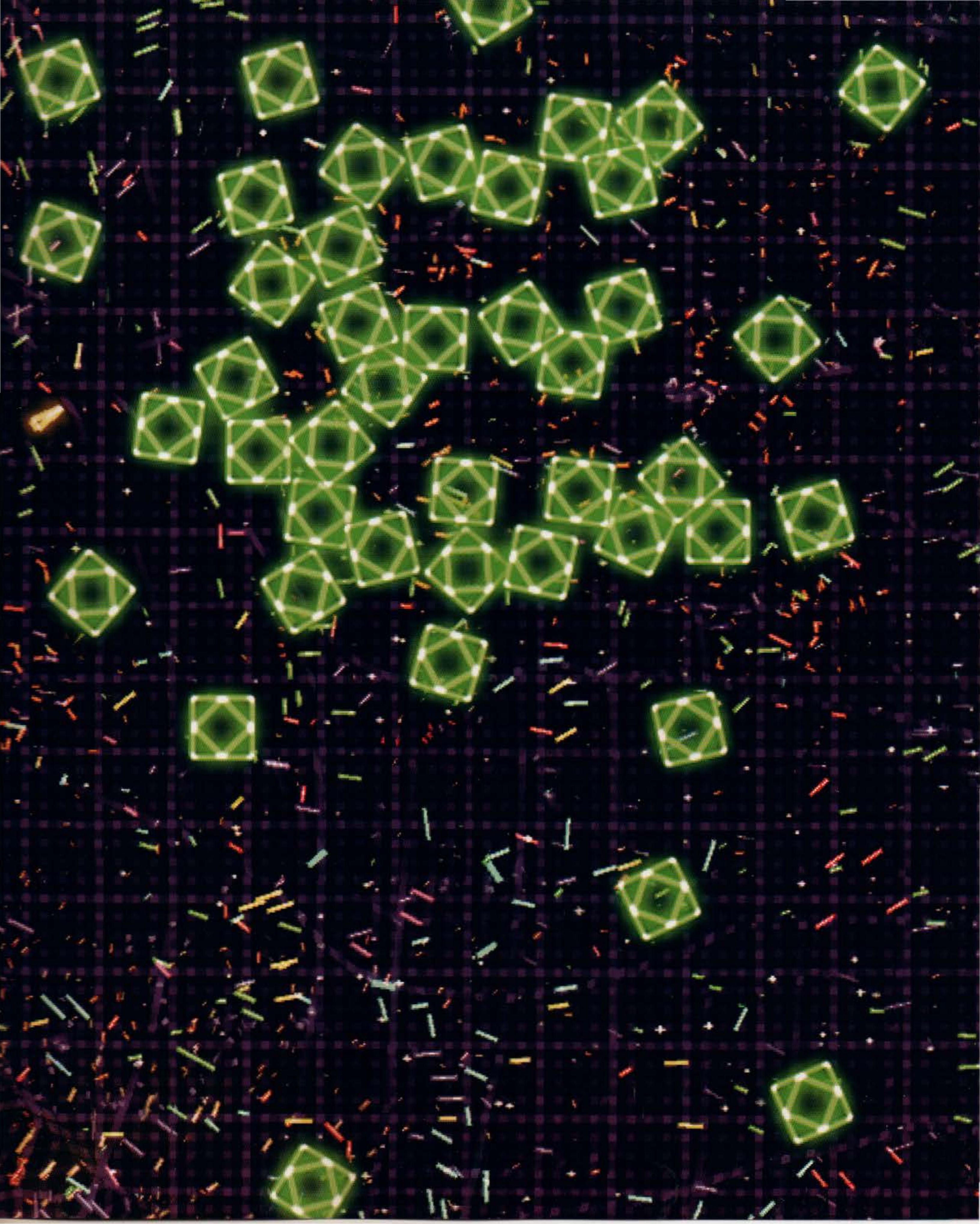


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